

The Complete Chronicle of the Emperors of Rome; Vol. 1

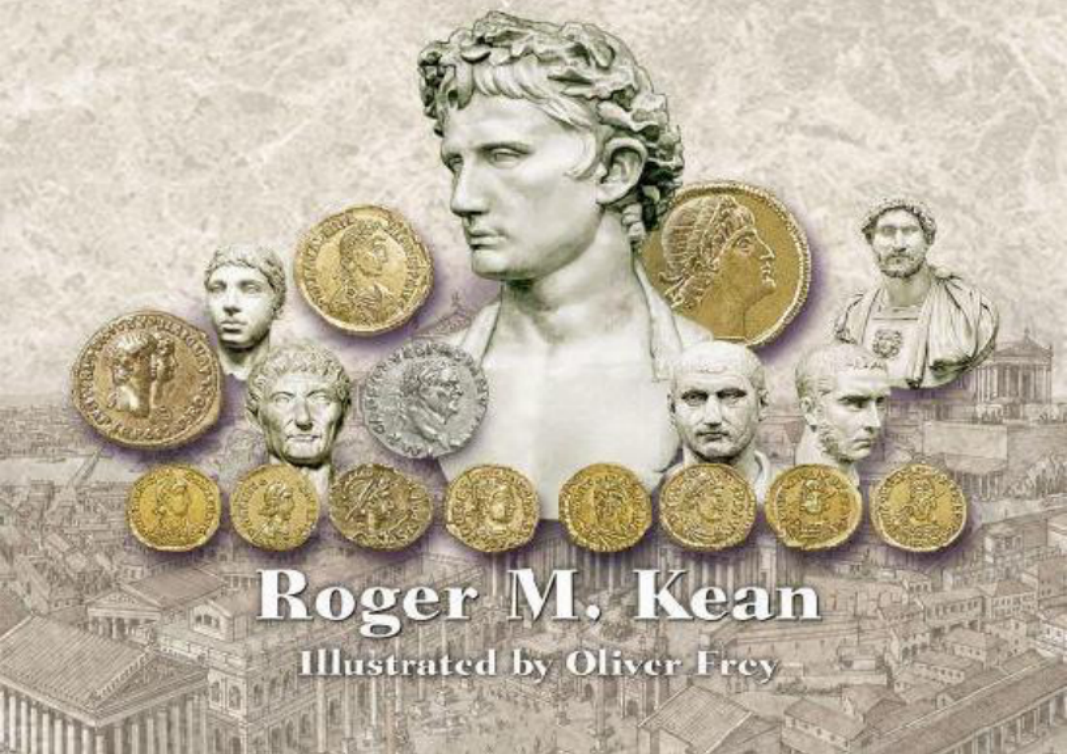
Roger M. Kean

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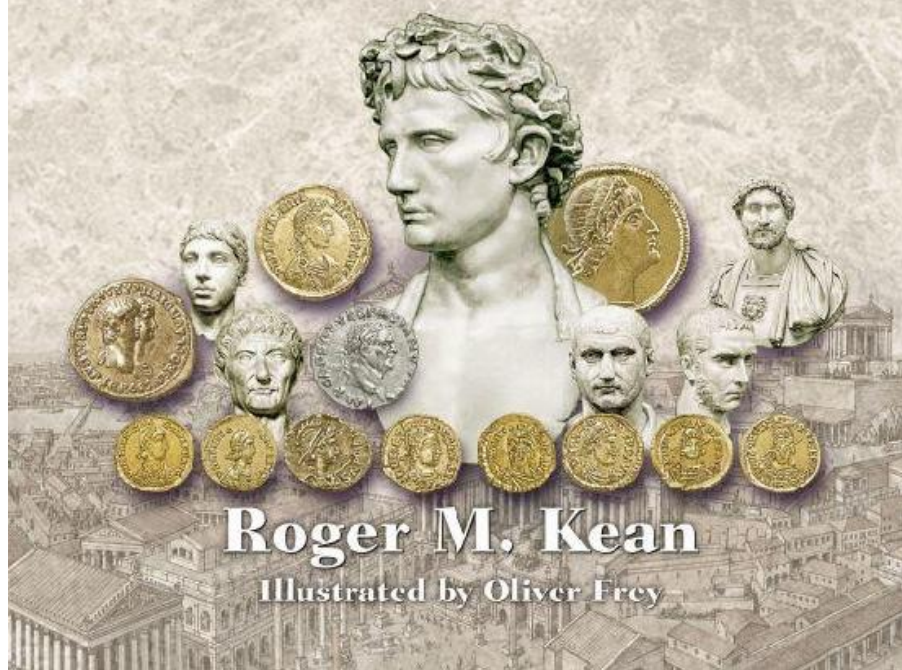
THE
COMPLETE CHRONICLE
OF THE
EMPERORS
OF
ROME

Volume 1



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Roger M. Kean

Illustrated by Oliver Frey

**THE
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Volume 1

ROGER M. KEAN

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THE COMPLETE CHRONICLE OF THE
EMPERORS OF ROME
VOL. 1

PREFACE

Winston S. Churchill in *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* notes that we cannot understand history without continually relating the long periods mentioned to the experiences of our own short lives. “Five years is a lot,” he writes. “Twenty years is the horizon to most people. Fifty years is antiquity.”

In an age when the world’s governments are not much older than two hundred years, and expectations of consistent political structures are limited to a few generations, the course of the Roman empire over eight hundred years seems astonishing. (This is counting from the end of the First Punic War in 241 BC, after which the Roman commonwealth can be considered an “empire,” to the conclusion of Justinian’s reign in AD 565.) That this is due in no small part to the concept of “emperor” is not to be doubted. A “family—albeit not necessarily linked by heredity or even by dynasty—ensured a constancy by being imbued with the very nature of the position and duties of leadership. The empire’s longevity indicates just how few emperors were the lazy no-nos of popular imagination, but were in fact individuals doing their best at maintaining the welfare of the Roman commonwealth, or *Imperium*.

In the institutional rule of ancient Rome, what we witness is unlike a monarchy as we have come to understand the concept since medieval times; this was an obligation attached to the position and status of emperor that continued beyond dynastic bounds. Being emperor of Rome was both the supreme goal, but also in itself the assumption of a colossal duty, of which most incumbents were aware—though they might not live up to it in the course of their reigns.

However, there is another interesting factor in Rome’s constancy, and that is the Romans’ general awareness of their own history. “Fifty years” may be “antiquity,” but it is clear that the Romans were very well aware of the past through mountains of the written word. In the age of Constantine, the antics of a Caligula or Commodus would still have been well known, either through the written or the spoken word. Some three hundred years after his death, Trajan was fondly remembered in the hopeful prayer that greeted a new emperor: “More fortunate than Augustus, better than Trajan.” Even during the worst of times, the average Roman citizen could take comfort from knowing who he was, where he came from, and hope that the shining example of the past would inspire his rulers to restore order to the world—

exactly as it should be.

This, and its companion volume, is a voyage of discovery to fill in those gaps that years of gathered understanding had still left vague. Histories—unless concentrating on particular individuals—tend to portray an array of rulers through such a long passage of time as though each sprang fully formed into their imperial roles. Yet even in the most anarchic of times, Rome's Caesars and Augusti were known quantities as they rose through the ranks towards power. In researching this book it has been fascinating to see how many have a recorded history prior to their elevation, and to uncover the peculiar logic of the time that led each one to the imperial diadem.

Although the books concentrate on the emperors and their lives, it is not possible to separate a ruler from the consequences of his actions. So the larger, changing phases of socio-political history emerge; and at a more intimate level so do many interesting subsidiary people: wives, children, companions, adversaries.

Maps and illustrations of coins and busts featured strongly in the original print edition of 2005. As you read through, you will find hyperlinks to a specially constructed website which will let you access relevant illustrations, maps, and family trees. In particular with the maps, I hope this will encourage even the least geographically minded to become involved in the places where events happen. The maps, too, are intended to add a ready sense of place and scale to the story and a feel for the perspectives of time.

It is worth drawing attention to the naming on the maps of the Mediterranean Sea. In pre-imperial times, and after the Punic Wars, Romans called it *Mare Nostrum*, Our Sea, for indeed, it was theirs by conquest. But by the imperial period, written references suggest it had come to be known as the *Mare Internum*, since it sat at the heart of the empire. The terminology *Mare Mediterraneum* did not become currency until the mid-sixth century and at a point in time after this story has concluded.

A passion for Roman history might seem sufficient reason to write about the Roman emperors and their often grim but always fascinating lives. But there is another. Surprisingly, there are few books offering a coherent, chronological narrative account of the emperors from Augustus to Justinian, arguably the last classical Roman emperor.

Many are familiar with the period stretching from Augustus to the Antonines, but then events become hazy; and many Roman students

have particular emperors or periods they know well, but little idea as to how the entire imperial train fits together. The Internet has boosted interest in Roman history, but too much of the available material ranges from the stuffily academic to the downright fictional; much is undigested, badly written, and contradictory. Of course, contradiction is the staple of history—the trick is to consider the options and make a decision as to what seems most plausible; and if all else fails, admit the alternative. I hope I have managed to do this, and at the same time write a gripping story in which emotion, a sense of passing time, the ennui of fighting a battle well lost, and the passions of all the characters involved emerge alongside the chronicle of the emperors' histories.

Roger Michael Kean

August 2012

PROLOGUE

End of the Republic

[108–44 BC]

The scholar M. Terentius Varro, who lived for eighty-eight years toward the end of the Republican period (c.115 BC–27 BC), established the date of 753 BC for the founding of Rome. Whether or not he was accurate—there were several other favored dates either side—it became the officially accepted year that the city came into being. For some two hundred and forty years the insignificant archaic Latin settlement on the east bank of the Tiber was ruled by a series of kings, followed by a little under five centuries of Republican government, during which time Rome expanded exponentially from a mere city to a Mediterranean-wide commonwealth.

From this point, for a period of just over half a millennium, the Roman state was governed by a series of emperors—more than a hundred of them. The word “governed” is employed loosely in this context, since the capabilities and behavior of many left much to be desired. The first key moment in this long history came during the lifetime of Julius Caesar (July 12/13, 100 BC to March 15, 44 BC), the figure most responsible for the final undoing of the Republic and the creation of a political environment in which autocracy was bound to prevail. As with most socio-political changes, this sweeping alteration in the Roman state did not happen overnight, nor was it a simple matter of an ambitious man overturning the rules that governed the Roman people. In fact Republican Rome enjoyed the most sophisticated form of government of any ancient Western civilization, a complex interweaving of constitutional and legal statutes, political protections, and counterbalances to elected authority. Caesar, and subsequently his adopted son Octavian, used the very substance of Roman law to bend the state to their will; although both also bent the rules whenever it suited, setting a precedent that many of their successors would follow.

There are as many theories behind the fall of the Roman Republic as there are historians to put them forward. However, certain assumptions can be made with some safety. By the middle of the first century BC Rome had become a victim of its own success. Conquests to the west in Hispania, to the east beyond Macedonia into Asia Minor and across the *Mare Internum* (Mediterranean) in North Africa had

made the senatorial governing system unsustainable. Even this may have worked for some longer time, were it not for the fact that the senate—the body of three hundred most senior Romans—had grown both complacent and fractious. For several decades prior, it had been riven with factional conflicts that often centered on the ambitions of the ancient aristocratic families on the one hand and those of the “new men,” politicians arising from the rural Italian provinces, on the other. These two social groups broadly, but not exclusively, divided themselves between the *Optimates* party, conservatives who put the rule of the senate first, and the *Populares*, reformers who worked through the people rather than the senate. The division of opinion was almost exclusively concerned with the benefits of the city of Rome and its immediate hinterland, not really with the greater matter of empire.

Put simply, the Roman state had become too large and encompassed too many different peoples with varying needs for the existing government by senatorial and public committee to cope. Rome might have been the center of the world, but its plutocrats acted more like the parochial land-owners they were descended from than the governors of an empire.

Rome itself had also swelled to bursting point, filled with a mass of indolent citizens who paid no taxes, thanks to the extraordinary spoils of recent conquests, and who constantly demanded free food and public entertainment. The mob was bored and happily exchanged yesterday's allegiance for today's, swayed by the next clever orator to come along. Street violence and open rioting was symptomatic of the factional crises facing the Republic, and in so many aspects it was writ large that Rome needed a strong man to guide the empire's fortunes. Before Caesar came to public notice, there had indeed been a string of such men, all of them with the loyalty of one or more of the Roman legions behind them. They owed their positions to a gradual erosion of the traditional constitution.

In earlier times, two senior senators were elected as consuls for each year. They were effectively the army's generals for their term. In theory each in turn, month by month, was active while his colleague looked on—one of the first checks and balances of power. In practice this was confused by the consul's military duties, especially in times of extended war, when both consuls would be in the field with their legions at the same time. There was a proper age for a senator to become a consul (forty-two), but this was increasingly ignored, as was the tradition that a consul should only serve once in his lifetime.

Periods of extended conflict, such as the Punic Wars, made it desirable that the consuls should have their year-long term prolonged (*prorogatio*) to provide a continuity of military leadership.

This finally led to the inevitable situation that an ambitious consul would find good reasons to request either a prolonged term or repeated consulships. The first to do both successfully was Gaius Marius (157–86 BC). He had himself elected consul first in 108 BC, again in 104, and then every year—first warring against Jugurtha in North Africa, and then against Germans invading Gaul and Italy—until his sixth consulship in 100. This was contrary to all law and precedent. But he was outdone by his erstwhile lieutenant, Lucius Cornelius Sulla (138–78 BC). After what was virtually a civil war between the supporters of the two former colleagues, Sulla marched on Rome and declared himself dictator in 81. The role of dictator was constitutionally allowed for in times of great danger to the state. In effect, a senior senatorial magistrate was elected dictator and given absolute single-handed power to govern until such time as the danger had passed. He was then expected to stand down in return for an indemnity against the results of his actions. Sulla's unilateral assumption of the dictatorship was unprecedented too, and it would not be the last. Sulla ruled Rome without limitation to the term of his office. However, it turned out to be a short period, but one notable for its cruelty as he “purged” any who had not supported him — thousands died, including senators and *equites*, men of the equestrian order, Rome's middle class businessmen. When, to everyone's surprise, he laid down the dictatorship at the end of the year he left behind a power vacuum into which stepped ambitious young men like Pompey, Crassus, and Caesar.

The New Professional Roman Army

None of these had any hope of gaining or retaining power without the backing of the Roman army, and this had changed greatly since the early and middle Republican periods. Previously, it had been an essentially unprofessional institution, manned by civilian conscripts who gave their time as part of the duty expected of every Roman citizen. This tradition dated back to archaic times when the tiny city-state was surrounded on all sides by foes and all male inhabitants of suitable age were called on to defend it in times of war. History shows what an effective fighting force the later Republican army was, but it suffered from a major drawback in the new era of growing empire and extended conquest. Tradition required legionaries to be at least *adsidui*, that is citizens who owned the minimum amount of property to be classed as land-owners. Since campaigning usually only took place between the spring to fall seasons, a consul's legion was dismissed from service at the end of the campaigning year. This was necessary because the men had to get back to their farms at the conclusion of a period of service. Legions were, therefore, dissolved annually only to be reinvented in the following campaign season.

When he was elected consul in 108, Gaius Marius faced a war in Numidia against King Jugurtha, who had been fighting Rome since 112. But he encountered a serious shortage of manpower. Over the previous four decades the Italian peninsula—heartland of the *adsidui*—had become depopulated of farming citizens. In part this was due to the seductive draw of Rome; with its corn dole and bright lights, the city naturally acted as a magnet for many rural citizens. As happens today, the young were particularly inclined to leave the land for a supposedly easier and more exciting urban lifestyle. But more importantly, laws and reforms had failed to prevent agrarian land from falling into the hands of a very few wealthy families, which they combined into giant estates called *latifundia*. The satisfactory conclusion of the Punic Wars and Macedonian conquest had provided plenty of cheap labor in the form of slaves, and so the original citizen-farmers were not only dispossessed of their property, they were not even granted the right of tenancy or menial labor. This inevitably led to a great migration to Rome of men no longer considered eligible to serve in the army because they were no longer *adsidui*; they had become part of the un-landed proletariat.

Faced by this situation, Marius simply abandoned the traditional practice of raising troops from among the *adsidui*, and instead enlisted

volunteers from the proletariat. However, these unmonied soldiers needed increases in the regular military stipend to afford their arms and armor and, more essentially, they expected to be kept in service to the end of their useful lives, and then settled on a smallholding for their old age. In effect, the legion had become a permanent organization into which new recruits could be added. It was also one that owed allegiance to its commander, a man now more than likely to lead them for much longer than the traditional year. The legions under first Marius, then Sulla, Pompey, Crassus, and Caesar had effectively become their general's private force.

[1. Link to: Marius, Sulla, Empire 100 BC](#)

Young Julius Caesar

With cracks appearing in the Republic at every turn, the existence of large, powerful armies loyal to their leader, and men with the will to govern—if necessary by force—everything was in place for the final collapse of Republican government. And Gaius Julius Caesar was the Roman to give it the push. Genius military commander, gifted orator, prolific writer and law-maker, Caesar was a man of many parts. Famous for his clemency—he pointedly spared the lives of political enemies—he was cruel in his treatment of the Celtic tribes in Gaul. He spoke the language of the common legionary, but moved among Rome's elite on equal terms—at least as regards his patrician status; the Optimates feared his popularist stance. His championing of the proletariat while accruing all honors he felt were owed to him made many of his aristocratic colleagues rightly suspicious of his motives. Julius Caesar had no time for nostalgic Republican sentiment.

From the ancient patrician gens Julii, supposedly descended from the goddess Venus, the young Julius was instilled with pride in Roman history, which must have been shaken when his father became a victim of political scheming and fell from grace, losing the family wealth along the way. From this point on Caesar was raised in Rome's poor Subura quarter, and until his middle adult years he remained immured in poverty. This may have contributed to his famous frugality. As the Roman historian Suetonius (c.AD 69–122) wrote: “That he drank very little wine not even his enemies denied.” There is a saying of his bitterest political enemy Marcus Cato that Caesar was the only man who undertook to overthrow the state when sober. Even in the matter of food Gaius Oppius tells us that “he was so indifferent...”

At the age of fifteen, on the death of his father, Caesar joined the army. Four years spent on hectic military campaigns in Asia Minor earned him a reputation for valor and physical strength that belied the epilepsy from which he occasionally suffered. Aged twenty, he won the *corona civica* (civic crown) for saving a fellow soldier's life in the storming of Mytilene on the Aegean island of Lesbos.

He first came to prominent political notice as a client of the fabulously wealthy Marcus Licinius Crassus (115–53 BC)—thus apparently hitching himself to the Sullan Optimates party. But his marriage to Cornelia, daughter of eminent Marian supporter Cinna, and the fact that Gaius Marius was his uncle by marriage, tied him to the democratic Populares cause. Marius rated Caesar a fellow radical

—in this he was only partly correct, although Caesar was to use radical tactics during much of his later life. He remained constant to the *Populares* and all his life remained an opponent of the senate, although he managed to maintain good relations with aristocratic Crassus.

In order to succeed in the Republican world, a young man with political ambitions had to have wealth, and while he had the former in abundance, Caesar had none of the latter. However, his problems were eased when, at thirty-six, he was elected *Pontifex Maximus*, the supreme priest of Rome. This unexpected appointment gave him funds, an official residence, and enhanced prestige. While financial concerns were uppermost, Caesar's desire for *auctoritas* superseded anyone's and often amounted to an obsession. *Auctoritas* literally means "authority," but in Latin the word meant much more, with overtones of eminence, public leadership, and the ability to influence events through sheer personality. It was a quality important to any Roman aristocrat, but to Caesar, the seeking of it was almost a religion.

Caesar's first senior administrative posting was as *propraetor* of Hispania Citerior (Nearer Hispania, later *Tarraconensis*) in 69 BC. The province had been recently subdued by Pompey after a long-standing rebellion, for which action the upstart general became known as Magnus, the "Great." The patrician Caesar must have envied the low-born Pompey, to whom military acclaim seemed to fall naturally. In support of Sulla, Pompey had won a string of victories over Marian forces in Italy, Sicily, and Africa. Another opportunity beckoned in Hispania when the Marian provincial governor, Quintus Sertorius, rebelled in 80 BC. The democrat refused to acknowledge the senate's supremacy had taken to the hills with some eight thousand men and accepted the offer of the Lusitanian tribes to become their leader. In 77, Pompey pressed for the command of an army to bring Sertorius to heel. The senate was reluctant to give *proconsular* powers to a young man who had held no previous offices, but when he refused to disband his legions the senators gave in. After successfully holding at bay the armies sent against him, Sertorius faced Pompey in 76. Over another three years Pompey wore down the rebel and his army of Roman refugees and Spanish guerrillas. The revolt collapsed when Sertorius was assassinated in 72, and Pompey gained the credit and the popular acclaim of the nation. He returned to Italy with his legions the same year.

Meanwhile, Crassus had been in the field against the slave rebellion of Spartacus, and pretty much wrapped up the messy business in the south of Italy when Pompey conveniently arrived in the north just in time to encounter a rag-tag remnant of the Spartacan force. He easily captured several thousand of them, and claimed the credit for ending the revolt. He got the triumph; Crassus did not. Crassus and Pompey stood at opposite poles of Roman nobility—Crassus of established senatorial lineage, an Optimate; Pompey one of the new men from rural Picenum. Their politics and characters clashed, and Crassus was jealous of Pompey's military acclaim, not to say incensed that the younger man had stolen his triumph for "defeating" the slaves when Crassus had done all the hard work. Their joint consulship of 70 BC had only served to divide them further.

Caesar distinguished himself in Hispania Citerior, sufficiently to stand for the consular elections on his return to Rome. He needed a consulship desperately so that he could be given a proconsular governorship of a province afterward—his only chance of accumulating wealth. It would also put him in command of an army of his own, which would increase his *auctoritas* greatly. But his chances of election were poor: he still lacked the money, and the Optimates majority in the senate detested him. Fortunately, he was able to rely on financial support from Crassus, but he knew that in order to win he also needed the backing of Pompey the Great, who was approved of by the senate for his military successes and Republican adherence (but disapproved of for his overweening ambition and provincial background).

Caesar had a valuable weapon in his armory—his daughter Julia, of whom Pompey was enamored. Her marriage to the great soldier cemented relations between the two men and, through Caesar's advocacy, drew Pompey into negotiations with Crassus. Caesar employed all his charm and courtesy and was able to persuade the two bitter enemies to become reconciled to the inalienable fact that combined they were strong enough to command the senate to abide by their wishes. With their joint support, Caesar was elected one of the consuls for the year of 59, and their partnership was later known as the First Triumvirate. In this, Julius Caesar was the junior partner, but it was a status he did not tolerate for long. Crassus had the money; Caesar was a patrician with a common touch—he was at home with ordinary folk—but Pompey had little to offer the triumvirate except his immense popularity among the legions. Even Cicero, one of his

most adamant supporters, said Pompey was “nothing great, nothing outstanding, nothing that is not low and popular.”

The arrangement was not a legally constituted one, it was a private agreement assuring its members of co-operation. Each acted ostensibly in the interests of the others, while in reality they worked to secure increased power and wealth for themselves. The busiest was Caesar, who, after his election, acted on behalf of the triumvirs from a position of consular strength. The three men exerted influence on the government apparatus, despite senatorial attempts to thwart them at every turn. They pursued policies that would win them popular support, including the presentation of free games and extra grain rations. All this was costly, so Caesar ensured that the triumvirs secured the overseas posts for the following year that would replenish their fortunes. Pompey returned to Hispania, Crassus pitched himself and his forces into Syria, while Caesar sought his destiny beyond the Alps in unconquered *Gallia Comata* (Gaul of the Long Hairs).

Although his task kept Caesar away from Rome for the better part of six years, he still returned from time to time to look after his own affairs and those of the triumvirate. The strain of this unnatural bonding soon became intolerable. Emergency talks dubbed the Luca Conference took place in 56 to avoid a falling out. The triumvirate was endorsed in 55 when Pompey and Crassus were once again consuls. But in 54, the link that kept Caesar and Pompey allied was severed when Julia died. A year later Crassus was killed in battle at Carrhae (Harran) in Mesopotamia. Pompey and Caesar were left tentatively circling one another, waiting and watching.

[2. Link to: The First Triumvirate](#)

Caesar Dictator

Caesar's conquest of Gaul in 58–51 BC was a remarkable achievement, even in a time of extraordinary men. It is not within the scope of this book to enter into any detail about the campaign. Suffice it to say that in the first three years he overran most of Gaul and Belgica, and then went on to subdue the German tribes living in the north of the region and push them back across the Rhine. He even crossed to the island of Britannia, but gave up his limited invasion when fresh trouble broke out behind him in Gaul under the leadership of the charismatic Vercingetorix. Through brilliant strategic planning, the legions finally cornered the Avernian prince at Alesia, and by 58 all of Gaul was thoroughly under Roman rule. Of more importance to him personally, Caesar now had a large, highly trained force of seven legions, whose soldiers adored him without reservation. Caesar now looked to Rome for his reward.

In 52, a reluctant senate had given Pompey a third consulship with the purpose of his quelling the continual political street fighting, but without a colleague to hinder him. This virtual dictatorship was more than the Luca Conference had allowed for between the triumvirs, and left Caesar with the suspicion that his colleague was conspiring against him. Caesar needed to be elected consul while still *propraetor* of Gaul, thus continuing his *imperium* and its automatic immunity to legal prosecution for any illegal acts he may have carried out in his province—of which, according to his political enemies, there were plenty. The senate insisted on the statutes, that he enter Rome as a *privatus* to canvas for the election. Although Pompey agreed to use his position to waive the regulations, Caesar no longer trusted him, or he may have not believed that Pompey could carry the senate with him. In any event, Caesar invaded Italy at the beginning of 49, crossing the Rubicon river—the boundary between Cisalpine Gaul and Italy—at the head of his devoted legions, and occupied Ariminum (Rimini). He seems to have striven for a peaceful situation, if one was possible on his own terms. One source tells how he pondered the alternatives: “To refrain from crossing will bring me misfortune; but to cross will bring misfortune to all men.” But he would not lose the initiative through caution, and it was clear he had taken his erstwhile triumvir completely by surprise. Pompey chose not to face him, and instead withdrew across the Adriatic to begin marshaling his forces in the Balkans while leaving Hispania in the hands of his lieutenants.

Rome and all Italy fell to Caesar with scarcely any fighting, but the

city had been emptied of most of its magistrates and senators, many accompanying Pompey, the rest fleeing to their country estates. His first task, therefore, was to provide some sort of government. However, he did this without entering the city, thus still adhering to constitutional form. The first act of the civil war took place in Hispania, where Pompey still had a powerful army. Hoping to deal with this before Pompey had time to raise a second army in the Balkans, Caesar dashed overland to Hispania. In his brief absence Marcus Antonius (Mark Antony), who as a young *tribunus militum* had won his favor in Gaul, was appointed Caesar's *magister equitum* (master of the horse) and left in charge of Italy. Antony ensured that the compliant senate named Caesar dictator. Pompey's cause fell rapidly in the hands of his poorly chosen generals, Lucius Afranius and Marcus Petreius. They surrendered in return for a pardon and the disbandment of the Pompeian legions. Caesar hurried back to Rome, where he was elected consul for a second time, to begin a round of diplomatic missions to help restore proper government. And then, at the end of a very hectic 49 BC, he set off to confront the Republicans.

After failing to dislodge Pompey's well-entrenched forces at Dyrrachium, Caesar marched into Thessaly to intercept Metellus Scipio, the proconsular governor of Syria, who was coming overland to join the Pompeian army. Pompey followed Caesar, and the three forces finally clashed in the summer of 48 at Pharsalus, in northern Greece. Despite being outnumbered two to one, Caesar's foot soldiers broke the massed Pompeian cavalry and then pressed the infantry to the point of routing it completely. Pompey fled to the coast and took ship to Egypt in the hope that the children of King Ptolemy Auletes, Cleopatra and Ptolemy XII, would remember that when he was alive their father owed his throne to Pompey's generosity. They did not — perhaps they feared Caesar more. When he landed, Pompey the Great was treacherously murdered on the beach, and his pickled head handed to a horrified Caesar on his arrival in Alexandria early in 47.

When news of the victory at Pharsalus reached Rome, Caesar's dictatorship was renewed. Now undisputed ruler of the Roman world, he mediated between the squabbling factions at the Alexandrian court, eventually siding with Cleopatra (and joining her in the regal bed), and then returned to Rome. The sojourn was brief; in 46, he went to Africa and defeated Pompey's remaining Republican forces at Thapsus. Among those there, Marcus Cato committed suicide, but Pompey's sons, Gnaeus and Sextus, fled to Hispania. Caesar pursued them and

the war was soon ended by the battle of Munda (45 BC). Gnaeus was killed shortly after the battle, but his younger brother Sextus made good his escape. Although the refugee could do nothing of consequence while Caesar lived, after the dictator's assassination he was able to make serious trouble.

Julius Caesar Rex

Having labored long and hard for this cherished position of power, Caesar set about enjoying the rewards. In 46 his dictatorship was renewed again, this time for ten years, but two years later he was given the office for life. Honors were heaped on him by obsequious senators trying to outdo one another. His birthday became a public holiday. The month of his birth was renamed “Julius” (July) after him. There seemed no end to his exaltation.

Although he refused the universally loathed title *rex* (king), and rejected the crown Antony offered him in 44 at the festival of Lupercalia, Caesar adopted many kingly trappings. He took to wearing a purple toga, the regal color. He was awarded the right to sit on a golden chair during senate meetings, wearing a golden wreath. The final acts of his life effectively dismantled the last vestiges of the Republic. Caesar made no secret of his contempt for the institution and those constitutional forms that he had adhered to during his rise to power. He ignored the role of the various *comitiae*, nominating magistrates himself; held consular elections for several years in advance after informing the senate of who would be elected; summoned the senate only to tell its members of his decisions; and silenced the tribunes who opposed him. When Queen Cleopatra of Egypt, with Caesarion, her son by Caesar, came to reside outside Rome’s walls as his mistress, patrician, senatorial, and equestrian disquiet turned to open rebellion. Rome still did not take kindly to monarchs and princes with a possible hereditary right.

According to Cicero, the conspiracy was contrived by people with “the courage of men but the understanding of boys”—in other words, they were naïve if they believed the death of Caesar would restore the Republic. On the agreed day, the Ides (15th) of March, 44, Caesar went to the senate at its appointed place for that day, the meeting hall in the Porticoes of Pompey. There, at the foot of Pompey’s oversize statue (which Caesar had allowed to remain), the large group of conspirators murdered him. Perhaps Caesar knew it was coming for he made little attempt to defend himself—he had even dismissed his lictors earlier. He succumbed to twenty-three stab wounds. After his death, Cleopatra returned with Caesar’s son to Egypt, vituperatively declaiming that the conspirators were traitors. Although there were certainly lofty as well as less noble motives for the murder, this cruel and senseless act unleashed a civil war worse than any in Rome’s history and ensured the end of the Republic forever.

What is important in the rise of Octavian, Caesar's adopted son and the future Augustus, is the Julian blood line; he was the son of Caesar's niece. As far into the future as the accession of Vespasian in AD 70, Roman soldiers would only accept a new emperor who had a hereditary link to the Julii, such was their veneration of Julius Caesar. Indeed, would-be emperors for two hundred years would cite their hereditary ties to the first Caesar, which soon ceased to be a name and became a title. Caesar himself had not become an emperor, but he had made it possible—even inevitable—that his successor Octavian would.

First, however, Octavian had a civil war to prosecute. Mark Antony had assumed that Caesar's mantle would fall on his own shoulders and not on those of the young man he contemptuously referred to as "the boy."

[3. Link to: Empire at Caesar's death, 44 BC](#)

[Family Tree: The Julian Descendants](#)

THE JULIO-CLAUDIAN DYNASTY

[63 BC–AD 68]

Augustus

Gaius (Julius Caesar) Octavianus / Imperator Caesar Augustus

[*Princeps January 16, 27 BC to August 19, AD14*]

The future Augustus was born on September 23, 63 BC in the Palatine district of Rome according to one account, or at the family estate in rural Velitrae according to another. This was during the consulships of the orator Marcus Tullius Cicero and Gaius Antonius, father of Mark Antony. On his father's side, according to Suetonius, the Octavians were famous only in ancient Velitrae. At some previous point in time, a certain Gaius Rufus had become the first Octavian to gain office by a popular vote, winning a quaestorship. His sons Gaius and Gnaeus fathered two very different branches of the family. Gnaeus's descendants all held high office, including in 87 BC the consulship for Gnaeus Octavius (together with Lucius Cornelius Cinna, an opponent of Gaius Marius) and again in 76, and also for Lucius Octavius in the following year. Gaius's branch, however, remained lowly *equites* until the entry into the senate of Gaius Octavius, who became famous as the father of Augustus. However, the father's influence was cut short by his death when his son was aged four, and it was Julius Caesar who was to become the greater imperative in the young Octavius's life.

The boy evidently made a good impression on Caesar, whom he would have met at family gatherings, since he was the grandson of Caesar's younger sister. At the age of twelve, he received his first taste of public speaking at the funeral of Caesar's daughter Julia, who had been married to Pompey. At his coming of age at sixteen, he was awarded military decorations when Caesar celebrated his African triumph over the Pompeians, although he was still too young to have seen actual service. But when Caesar went to Hispania to fight Pompey's sons, Octavius followed with a small escort. Despite suffering from an illness, he fought his way with his men along enemy-held roads and survived a shipwreck—a spirited action that delighted Caesar. It was in Gaul Narbonensis that Octavius first met Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, a junior military tribune on Caesar's staff, who was to remain Octavius's lifelong companion and supporter.

Caesar now promoted his great-nephew to the rank of military

tribune and, on the recovery of Hispania, sent him ahead to Apollonia in Epirus, to begin planning a war against the Parthian empire in revenge for the destruction of Crassus and his legions. In his spare time, Octavius studied Greek literature and continued a lengthy correspondence with his patron as Caesar pursued his reforms of the government in Rome. Octavius was nineteen when the news of Caesar's assassination reached him. Since—to almost everyone's surprise including his own—he was named as Caesar's heir in the will, he ignored his mother's pleas to stay away from the politically dangerous city. The will, read at Caesar's funeral, gave the bulk of his fortune to Octavius, whom he posthumously adopted as his son. If Octavius were to refuse the adoption Decimus Junius Brutus was named in his place, which was ironical since Brutus had agreed to join the assassination conspiracy, albeit in an insignificant way. For Mark Antony, who had commanded Italy as *magister equitum* for three years until 47 and was Caesar's colleague in the consulship at the time of the dictator's murder, there was nothing of consequence. To put it mildly, this was something of a blow, since Antony had assumed to be named Caesar's heir; and his dissolute, profligate lifestyle and overweening political ambitions certainly required the support of Caesar's fortune.

The problem for both the senate and Octavius was that much of Caesar's wealth and the loyalty of his legions were in Antony's hands, and the surviving consul had ensured the support of the current *magister equitum*, Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, by securing him the office of *Pontifex Maximus* left vacant by Caesar's death. In addition he was effectively signaling his intention to assume the role of dictator. This the senate was robustly resisting as Octavius arrived in Rome. Antony was unsurprisingly cool in his reception of "the boy." Meanwhile, thanks to Antony playing both ends against the middle, Marcus Junius Brutus and Gaius Cassius Longinus, the most distinguished of Caesar's assassins, had been allowed to leave Rome free men, and had fled to Macedonia and Syria to begin raising another Republican army.

The underlying motive in all of Octavius's actions was to avenge Caesar's murder and to keep his laws and decrees in force. Unable at once to punish the leading assassins, he sought election as a *tribunus plebis* (tribune) to give him the authority required in order to carry out his plans. Elected tribunes had the constitutional right to question and even veto magisterial legislation. Antony used his consular powers to oppose Octavius's candidacy on the grounds that although a plebeian

by birth he was now an adoptive Julian, therefore a patrician and ineligible to be a tribune; though he was understood to have suggested to Octavius that a hefty bribe might make him change his mind. Octavius had better things to spend his money on, and Antony's attitude drove him into the hands of the Optimates who—seeking any advantage—wanted to use his name against Antony's naked ambition. Cicero, so opposed to the Caesarian faction, now sought to gather Caesar's young heir into his Republican camp, and Octavius compliantly agreed to be guided in all things by the great rhetorician. For his own part, Octavius needed Cicero's powerful voice in his battle against Antony, but was never tricked into believing that Cicero held him in high esteem. The great man was not fooled either, and summed up senatorial feelings when he said “praise [Octavius], honor him, then get rid of him.”

In 43 BC Antony, feeling a cold wind blowing, left Rome for the proconsular command of Gaul Cisalpina, which he had awarded himself by passing a law that overturned Caesar's appointment of Decimus Junius Brutus to the province. Cisalpine Gaul's advantage lay in being outside Italy, but close enough for him to influence events in Rome. However, Brutus refused to give up his rightful command, and war threatened. Cicero then began a series of impassioned speeches (the Philippics) against Antony, and in one called him one of “the very blackest and foulest monsters that have ever lived since the birth of man,” worse even, he railed, than a Marius or a Sulla. Under the consuls for 43, Aulus Hirtius and Gaius Vibius Pansa, the senate sent an army north to aid Brutus, to which Octavius attached himself. Lepidus, whom Cicero had failed to suborn to the Optimates' cause, offered support to his former colleague, and thus strengthened, Antony attempted the expulsion of Brutus from Mutina (Modena). But Antony lost two battles around the city and withdrew to the safety of Lepidus's camp. However, both Hirtius and Pansa were killed during the action, and Octavius seized control of the situation by demanding one of the vacant consulships. The soldiers of the legions would follow any with the name Caesar—Octavius had assumed it even though it was not yet legally his (the adoption required approval by the ancient *Comitia Centuriata* and Antony was able to prevent this for some time) so when the senate refused, Octavius marched on Rome and secured the consulship by force. He now styled himself Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus (Octavian), and basked in his unparalleled popularity among the Italian armies and the plebs as Caesar's true heir.

The Second Triumvirate

The last opportunity to restore the Republic was gone. Rome's own obsession with personal ambition had undone it, and Cicero's heroic efforts to revive it had turned into little more than hot air. However, now only in his twenty-first year, Octavian still had much to achieve before he was to become Rome's sole master. Financially and militarily unready to tackle Antony and Lepidus, Octavian revealed his shrewd grasp of realpolitik by combining forces with his enemies. His fear that the senate would force the dispersal of his legions to avoid paying the veterans was well founded, so he laid aside his differences with Antony and Lepidus, and the three most powerful Romans met at Bononia (Bologna) in 43. The result, intended to present a united front against the senate and the assassins, was the *Triumviri Reipublicae Constituendae* (Triumvirs for the Regulation of the Republic). Unlike the First Triumvirate, the Second was set up by law, and was effectively a joint dictatorship. Virtually at sword point, the senate granted the triumvirs draconian powers to hunt down Caesar's killers. In the ensuing purge, more than two thousand were proscribed and executed, including the too-voluble Cicero—on whom Octavian was bloodily willing to turn his back in return for Antony sacrificing some of his own favorites. However, the real enemy was massing to the east under the banners of Marcus Brutus and Cassius.

The triumvirs crossed the sea in 42 and were victorious against the assassins' seventeen rebel legions at Philippi in Macedonia. Rather than risk capture, Brutus and Cassius committed suicide. In the same year, Julius Caesar was deified and Octavian basked in the great man's reflected glory—the adopted son of a god. Antony and Octavian now redistributed the empire between them. Octavian received Italy and the western provinces, which included the command against Sextus, the surviving son of Pompey the Great. Antony took the East and Lepidus was sidelined by being given only Africa, decades away from becoming the important province it would turn into. Antony was pleased with the division. The western provinces were still wild and largely unproductive places, the Orient was a wealthy prize. But Octavian's plans were centered on holding Rome.

Back in Rome, Octavian faced a new conflict. Known as the Perusine War, it was sparked when he attempted to settle the Philippi veterans on confiscated land. Antony's brother Lucius, one of the consuls, backed by Antony's wife Fulvia, took up arms on behalf of the dispossessed Italians. After months of desultory skirmishing, Lucius

surrendered at Perugia (Perugia). Fulvia died shortly after. The conflict might have spiraled into full-scale civil war when Antony hurried back and landed at Brundisium (Brindisi) in 40, but both armies—all from Caesar's old legions—forced the two men to make peace. The triumvirate was re-established and the east-west division between the two principals confirmed. To secure the partnership, Octavian married off his sister Octavia to Antony.

In the confusion after Caesar's murder, Sextus Pompeius had occupied Sicily, still the principal provider of grain to Rome. When he cut off the supply, the threatened famine brought the triumvirs to the table in 39. However, the complex peace overtures failed, and Antony left the matter in Octavian's hands to set off again for his triumviral oriental command in 37 BC.

During the peace discussions with Sextus Octavian had agreed to marry Scribonia, a Pompeian relative. This expedient was doomed to failure since the two were ill-matched, and as war seemed shortly inevitable the union was politically pointless. He divorced Scribonia in 38, when she was pregnant with his daughter Julia, and married Livia Drusilla (58 BC–AD 29). A member of the powerful and ancient Claudian family, when she was sixteen Livia had married her cousin, Tiberius Claudius Nero, and bore him one son, Tiberius; and was pregnant with Drusus when she divorced her husband to marry Octavian. The abruptness of the wedding, only days after her divorce, caused a scandal that Octavian never quite lived down. Although she was not to bear him any children, which partly explains the succession problems that followed, the marriage lasted, spanning fifty-two turbulent years until Augustus's death in AD 14.

With Scribonia put aside, Octavian now set about dealing with Sextus Pompeius. Well served by his friend Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, Octavian invaded Sicily. Agrippa's massive fleet swung the balance when it annihilated the Pompeians at Naulochus in September 36. Sextus fled to Antony (where he was soon executed on conspiracy charges) while Octavian confronted Lepidus. His fellow triumvir had brought his army from Africa for the campaign and now claimed Sicily for himself. The situation was critical, but Octavian gambled that the Caesarian legionaries had little love for Lepidus. He persuaded the soldiers to desert, deposed Lepidus from the triumvirate, and sent him into exile.

In the East, Antony's campaign against the Parthians—the one Caesar had been planning at the time of his murder—ended in failure

in 36, and he returned to Alexandria and his mistress, Queen Cleopatra. This affair had started in 41 BC, when Antony had summoned her to Tarsus to explain her actions since Caesar's death. Plutarch wrote of her exotic arrival: "She came sailing up on a galley whose stern was golden; the sails were purple and the oars silver. The queen, in a dress and character of Aphrodite, lay on a couch of gold brocade, as though in a picture, while about her were pretty boys like cupids who fanned her."

Her effect on Antony may have been erotic, but a more plausible explanation lies in politics. At some point after 37 BC Antony put aside Octavia and married Cleopatra. This foreign wedding was not recognized in Rome, but to Egyptians, Mark Antony had become their king. For Cleopatra, first Julius Caesar, now Antony, represented the power of Rome. But Rome was a force that had undercut the traditional means of maintaining Ptolemaic power in Egypt, which relied on an army of Greek mercenaries to keep the native population in subjection. These were raised in the Greek dominions, over which Rome was now master, and as a result Egyptian military strength had declined. Using her charms on Caesar and Antony was a sensible way of influencing Rome to give back some of her country's old recruiting grounds.

For Antony, he had a choice: stay in the East and found an oriental Roman empire with Cleopatra, or invade the West and deal with Octavian. Being Antony, he wanted both, on the grounds that if he failed in the West, he could always fall back on the East and hold it against Octavian. But whatever residual affection he had enjoyed as a protégé of Caesar had been thrown away: by (illegally) marrying a reigning monarch; by holding a sacred Roman triumph in Alexandria (for the failed Parthian campaign); by declaring Julius Caesar's son Caesarion to be the true heir of the West; by humiliating his virtuous wife, Octavia. In Rome, Octavian had cleared the senate of the small Antonian faction, and so found little difficulty in arousing war talk. Antony's actions left himself vulnerable to his rival, who ably portrayed his former triumvir as either blind to reason or plain mad. Octavian determined to redeem Rome's honor and forced Italian citizens to swear allegiance to his cause (the *coiuratio Italiae*). Antony tried to enlist the support of Roman allies and client states, but he could not overcome the difficulty of being so far from the recruiting grounds in and around Rome, where the best soldiers were to be found.

War was declared late in 32 BC and after much maneuvering the rival fleets finally clashed off Actium in the Ionian Sea on September 2, 31. Under Agrippa's naval command, Octavian's fleet was swiftly triumphant. Immediately, Octavian established his control over Antonine Achaea (Greece) and Asia. He then invaded Egypt. Cornered in 30, Antony and Cleopatra committed suicide. Although he took Antony's children by Cleopatra under his protection, Octavian ordered the death of Caesarion, thereby removing a legitimate contender for Roman rule. The spared children he sent to Rome where they were raised and educated by his sister Octavia as their rank deserved. The history of the two boys is unknown, but the young Cleopatra Selene married Juba II, king of Numidia and Mauretania. Juba's father had backed the Pompeians against Caesar and committed suicide after the battle of Thapsus (46 BC). Juba II (c.52 BC–AD 23) had gone as a hostage to Rome, where he was educated as a Roman and eventually granted citizenship. He was reinstalled as a client king in 25 BC.

Egypt lost its independent status and became a Roman province, and Octavian set his troops to cleaning out the irrigation canals of the Nile, which had silted up from years of neglect. This was aimed to improve productivity and provide another valuable source of grain for Rome, alleviating the city's reliance on Sicily and a still uncertain Africa. He also visited the sarcophagus of Alexander the Great and showed his veneration by covering the mummy's head with a golden crown. According to Suetonius, when he was then asked if he would like to visit the tombs of the royal Ptolemies, he replied: "I came to see a king, not a row of corpses." It cannot have escaped his attention that he, Gaius Octavianus at the age of thirty-two, was in reality the king of the Roman empire.

[4. Link to: Octavian v. Antony, 44–30 BC](#)

The First Emperor of Rome

The invention of Augustus, the first emperor of Rome, was an insidiously gradual process. However, early in 30 BC Octavian was not yet Augustus; that was an event three years in the future. There was much to be done after the fall of Antony and Cleopatra. Their removal left the whole eastern half of the empire in much confusion. Octavian kept many of Antony's arrangements in place, as long as old loyalties were suitably redirected, a show of trust that earned him the gratitude of many former opponents. Meanwhile, he received news of the adulation being heaped on him back in Rome. The reorganization took up most of the next year and a half, and Octavian only returned to the capital—amid tumultuous celebrations—in August of 29. He celebrated three triumphs over three days: for Dalmatia, Actium and Egypt. Perhaps as many as twenty-five legions totaling forty thousand men were then settled on land both in Italy and the adjacent provinces, this time without the unrest that had led to the Perusine War, since the vast wealth of Egypt allowed for ample compensation for the sequestered.

Nevertheless, despite the welcoming attitude of the senate and the people, Octavian's position was not clearly defined, least of all legally. It was clear that with the overwhelming support of every legion in the empire he was the *de facto* ruler of Rome, but there was no legal warrant for his power base. In short order after his final victory over Antony, the senate bypassed some of the more obvious problems by allowing Octavian a continuous consulship that lasted from 29 to 23 BC. The constitutional process that followed was not instantaneous, nor did it adhere to a single agenda. Instead, it evolved piecemeal over time, with two key events: the "Constitutional Settlements" of 27 and 23 BC; some refinements in 19; and sporadic assignments of numerous rights and privileges down to the granting of the ultimate title, *Pater Patriae* (Father of his Country) in 2 BC.

As Augustus, he was to later refer to the non-legal basis for his dominance as "universal consent." He explained this as being "in complete control of [the empire's] affairs" precisely because everyone wanted him to be and, rather more significantly, because he was the last powerful man standing. There was also some justification for this, in that he had ended the civil wars, and all hopes for a peaceful future now rested with him alone. However, holding continuous consulships would hardly be sufficient as a method of administration in the long term, especially if, as he intended, the old order should be seen to be

restored; as he portrayed it he was not overthrowing the Republic, he was strengthening it. Octavian was content to make haste slowly, preferring the inevitability of gradualness from one precedent to another. He had learned the lesson of Caesar's fall from grace by too hasty reform. This no doubt explains the eighteen-month gap between his return to Rome in August 29 BC and the First Constitutional Settlement at the beginning of 27. He also recognized—as Caesar had not—the inherent danger of alienating the aristocracy, and did everything to appease the sensibilities of the elite by appearing modest in his ambitions.

He certainly achieved this aim on January 13, 27 when he entered the senate and, to general shock, announced that he planned to surrender his powers and retire to private life. The surprise was not universal. His particular supporters, who had presumably been warned beforehand, led the mounting cries of alarm and offered a solution that did not insult the constitution. This was to grant him proconsular command of approximately half of all the provinces—Hispania (except Baetica), Gaul, Syria, Cyprus, and Egypt, while the senate and people controlled the remaining provinces. After a show of reluctance, Octavian graciously accepted. His were all provinces that his military *legati* were already governing and which in effect he had placed at the disposal of the senate and people. And he could point to legal precedents such as the extended commands granted to Pompey and Caesar in the late Republic, for instance (although neither of these was as extensive in scope), which appealed to Octavian's desire to appear to be maintaining traditions while doing nothing alarmingly new or innovative. This *imperium proconsulare* was granted to him for a period of ten years, but as with many term-condition privileges given him, no one attempted to take them back when they expired. In consequence, Octavian was free to appoint legates to administer the provinces on his behalf, with the exception of all-important Egypt where he wanted no one of senatorial rank to interfere. Egypt remained effectively a private imperial fief, governed by an equestrian prefect.

There was a theoretical drawback to Octavian's new powers: by ancient law the *imperium* of a proconsul could not be exercised inside the city of Rome. But in practice this was not a problem—for as long as he was also a consul he was effectively the most distinguished of the urban magistrates.

More honors were forthcoming. At a second meeting on January

16, Octavian was named Augustus, a word ringing with religious significance (augur) and social meaning (*auctoritas*) but falling well short of suggesting overt political dominance. Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus now became Imperator Caesar Augustus. "Augustus" was only a cognomen, but he came to be known by it, and after his death it was granted the status of a title. At the time there was no word "emperor" in Latin, which is derived from the word *imperator*, a title given by his soldiers to a successful general after a victory but who had not yet entered Rome to celebrate a triumph. In time, since the power of the army made its *imperator* the sole ruler of Rome, the word came to be associated with the absolute ruler of the empire. Augustus was content to adopt the title of *princeps* (first or leading citizen), from which we derive the word "prince." This leads to the use of the word "princirate" to describe the rule of the Roman emperors. "princeps" and "princirate" become less appropriate by the mid-third century AD as the nature of absolute rule changed to a greater despotism. Augustus was said to be fond of voicing the opinion that he was no Caesar, meaning he was not a dictator or tyrant, merely the first man of Rome. It was a nicely modest attribute, familiar to Roman ears for centuries, which suited his subtle but relentless method of gaining total control by stealth.

Other honors carrying more symbolic meanings were heaped on him that helped establish Augustus's pre-eminent position in the state. By means of the First Settlement, Augustus was simultaneously commander, leader, and savior, yet no one of his privileges was inconsistent with those given to earlier Republican leaders, it was their concatenation that was unique. As a further mark of respect, the month Sextilis was renamed "Augustus." Humble Octavius had achieved much, and he was not yet thirty-six. He wasted no time in demonstrating that his great powers could be used to benefit Italy by ordering the repair of all the main arterial highways that had fallen into a sad state during the years of civil war. With this task under way, Augustus left Rome because he felt that his presence was needed in the western provinces, taking with him his nephew Gaius Claudius Marcellus and his stepson Tiberius, both of them strapping youths of fifteen. The tour of Gaul and Hispania, which kept him away from Rome until 24 BC, was probably a sensible move in that it gave him a low profile out of the public eye while the arrangements of the First Settlement took root. During his absence his aides Agrippa and Maecenas supervised matters in Rome.

On his return in the spring of 24, it was evident that the settlement of 27 had failed to win over the conservative constitutionalists, who continued to believe that Augustus had not returned the Republic to them. He began planning to modify elements of the settlement. Whether rumors of his intentions led to the conspiracy of the Republicans Fannius Caepio and Varro Murena, or whether they reacted to the Second Constitutional Settlement, is not known, but in c.23 Augustus suspected both men, and they were tried and executed. Nothing was solved by this, for deep in senatorial sentiment it rankled that Augustus had monopolized the office of consul, debasing what had hitherto been the highest position to which a Roman could aspire. However, as has been shown, should he lay down his perpetually renewable consulship he would render illegal his exercise of power within Rome itself. The provisions of the Second Constitutional Settlement were designed to get around this conundrum. By relinquishing the consulship in future years, he not only removed a source of senatorial annoyance but also made available an extra post to qualify men for administrative appointments; and the expanding empire needed capable administrators.

Augustus announced that he would give up the consulship (and was only to take it up for dynastic reasons on two further occasions in the rest of his life). In return, he received an empire-wide grant of *imperium proconsulare* for five years. By virtue of this extensive gift, Augustus could intervene in the affairs of any province in the empire. Unlike other governors, he was also given dispensation to retain his power within the city limits of Rome. This was at the heart of what he needed in order to enlarge his powers, but it could be dressed up in a purely rational way for practical reasons: otherwise, every time he left the city, his proconsular power would need to be renewed.

In abrogating his earlier given right to the consulship, there was one further and very important hurdle in his way: the question of succession. When Augustus fell seriously ill in 23 BC and was expected to die, the problem came into sharp focus. His successor would have to be of Julian blood, the army would agree to nothing less, which ruled out his close friend Agrippa (but who would have to take charge if he did die). So he turned to his nephew Marcellus, a young man with much to recommend him.

Marcellus—son of Augustus's adored sister Octavia by her first marriage to Gaius Claudius Marcellus (after his death she wed Mark Antony) and granddaughter of Julius Caesar's sister Julia—was

technically a Claudian, but also with Julian blood. In marking Marcellus out for the succession, Augustus revealed the central strategy for the perpetuation of the principate, one that would be employed by many future emperors: a series of stepping stones were laid out that indicated the princeps' preference. Although there was no obligation on the people or the senate to accept what the "signs" meant, few dared oppose Augustus's clear wishes. The steps consisted of allying the chosen man to the imperial family through marriage and promoting the would-be successor through the *cursus honorum* at a pace far in advance of the traditional age requirements.

And so: in 25 BC Marcellus married fourteen-year-old Julia, Augustus's only child by his first wife Scribonia; in 24 the senate granted Marcellus the right to hold magistracies at an earlier age than normal; in 23 he became an aedile without having first been a quaestor, and was permitted to stand for consular election ten years before the traditional age. None of this, however, made his succession inevitable. After all, Augustus only held a special commission from the people and senate, it was not something he could will to anyone else. He needed a solution that not only retained his power but also perpetuated it for his successor.

The answer lay in the tribunes' powers. They were enabled to transact business with both the senate and the people, and could enact or veto legislation. On 26 June 23 BC the senate conferred on Augustus the *tribunicia potestas* (tribunician power), which was ratified by the people through a special assembly (*comitia tribuniciae potestatis*). It combined all the ordinary and some extraordinary prerogatives of the tribunate, most importantly that it was for life. (In fact, it was granted on an annual basis, but on the understanding that it would be perpetually renewed.) He was able to show this very un-Republican innovation in a positive light: since tribunes traditionally safeguarded citizens against the unjust use of a magistrate's power, Augustus could claim he was associated with the protection of citizens, not their repression.

In addition to disguising the military basis of his position through the tribunes' legal trappings, the *tribunicia potestas* rendered his nomination of a successor more feasible. Since it was within his gift to confer the power on another man, that individual would be designated as his successor because he would be the equal of Augustus. With both his tribunician and proconsular powers, Augustus now had the ability to direct affairs in every wing of domestic and foreign administration.

These two powers were long to remain the twin pillars of the Roman emperors' legal position. However, Augustus was unable to avoid the tragedy of his nephew's untimely death at the end of 23. With Marcellus gone, Augustus selected Agrippa, not as his successor, but as a regent until another Julian came of age.

The Succession Question

The informal nature of Augustus's succession arrangements laid his family open to perpetual domestic turmoil and proved the most consistently destabilising political factor in his reign; and those of future emperors. At least the granting of signs of preference to favored individuals—in this case drawn largely from within the princeps' own house—had become accepted. In selecting members of his extended family Augustus was behaving entirely within the ethos of the Roman aristocracy, for whom family was paramount. It also ensured that the name Caesar, so vital in establishing his own control over the army, remained at the head of the state. The thorny problem was who should be preferred.

Shortly before Marcellus's death, Agrippa had left for the Orient. Some accounts suggest that Augustus's closest friend went in a high dudgeon, annoyed at being passed over for the nineteen-year-old Marcellus. The stripling, basking in imperial favor, had found it hard to hide his contempt for the older man, even though in his late thirties Agrippa was hardly in his dotage. Undoubtedly irritated at Marcellus's attitude, it is unlikely that Agrippa extended his annoyance toward Augustus, in view of the fact that he went east with a grant of *imperium proconsulare*, a share in Augustus's own powers. Augustus would not have given this if he suspected his friend's motives for wanting to leave Rome. In the event, with Marcellus dead, Agrippa was recalled to marry widowed Julia, a sign that he was marked for the succession in some form. After the marriage, Agrippa resumed his command of the Orient, and then in 18 BC Augustus made him his colleague in the *tribunicia potestas*, which meant that if Augustus were suddenly to die Agrippa would automatically become princeps. But the principate did not become a dyarchy, for Agrippa's tribunician power was limited to five years, whereas that of Augustus was both annual and perpetual.

Julia's marriage to Agrippa was fruitful and she bore him three sons, Gaius in 20, Lucius in 17, and Agrippa Postumus in 12 BC. There were also two daughters: Julia the Younger and Agrippina. Julian blood was again in the ascendancy, and Augustus now concentrated his hopes for the succession on his grandsons, making his point unmistakably in 17 by adopting Gaius and Lucius, who both became Caesars. It was a signal honor for Agrippa to have his sons adopted into the imperial family and made him at the very least the father of the next emperor.

Because his grandsons were only infants, Augustus decided to appoint two further guardians. This office fell to the two Claudian stepsons Livia had brought him, Drusus and Tiberius. History leaves us no indication of how Drusus felt about what was in effect a demotion in the hereditary line. He had an easy-going, open nature and, while never discourteous to his stepfather, made little secret of his opposition to the principate and his dreams for a full restoration of the Republic. Tiberius, naturally inclined to keep his Republican thoughts to himself, was clearly disgruntled at being passed over for two children, and his relations with them were never good. Both stepsons accepted their guardianship, for there was little alternative, and went on to serve Augustus well in military commands during the next four years.

In the spring of 12 BC, shortly after returning to Rome, Agrippa died, not only robbing Augustus of a trusted friend, but also of a regent in the event of his own death. Agrippa's sons were still too young to be successors (the third was only born after his father's death, hence his cognomen Postumus). Augustus now forced Tiberius to divorce the wife he loved, Agrippa's daughter by a previous marriage named Vipsania, and marry the twice-widowed Julia in 11 BC. This was clearly not intended as a sign that Tiberius stood next in line for the succession, only that he was intended to replace Agrippa as the regent-guardian to the two young Caesars in the event of Augustus's death. Besides, his dour countenance and reportedly boorish conversation did not endear him to Augustus. Despite his open Republicanism, Augustus preferred the younger Drusus, who was still allowed the freedom of a military life, while Tiberius was now palace-bound by his duties. Unfortunately, Drusus was killed in 9 BC after a fall from his horse during a brilliant campaign that had taken his legions as far north as the Albis (River Elbe).

In 6 BC, having just been granted a share of the *tribunicia potestas* by Augustus, Tiberius unexpectedly retired to the island of Rhodes, despite his prominent public position. Augustus, infuriated by Tiberius's defection, had little choice but to rely on his own still-robust health to see his adopted sons Gaius and Lucius Caesar to their maturity. But fate intervened once more and both young men died: Lucius of an illness at Massilia in AD 2 and Gaius two years later of a wound received during a siege in Armenia. Augustus bowed to the inevitable and restored Tiberius to Rome as the only member of his household with the experience to help him, or carry on in the event of

his death.

But Augustus still wished to ensure ultimate succession to a Julian, so at the same time he adopted his surviving grandson, the young Agrippa Postumus, and obliged Tiberius to adopt his dead brother Drusus's son, his nephew Julius Caesar Germanicus. This relegated Tiberius's own son, also named Drusus, to the position of second choice. Although he was technically a Claudian, Germanicus had Julian blood on his mother's side and moreover had married Agrippina, Augustus's granddaughter. Tiberius was once again relegated to the role of emperor-regent. The symbolism was clear—ultimately Julians, not Claudians, would inherit the principate. Unfortunately, the teenaged Postumus was a brutal lout, who in AD 7 Augustus was obliged to banish to the small coastal island of Planasia. Whether he liked it or not, up to the time of his death in AD 14 Augustus came to rely more and more on dour, grumbling, and disillusioned Tiberius.

The succession question, then, was a difficult one for Augustus, and his solutions only perpetuated the problem for all future emperors. Despite the principal family's internal difficulties, Augustus—who stood forcefully for a return to old Roman moral virtues of the family—was keen to present a united image of the imperial house to the populace. We have been left a superb example of this family-values propaganda in the southern frieze of the *Ara Pacis Augustae* (Altar of the Augustan Peace), dedicated in January 9 BC. It depicts the imperial family parading as a dignified and corporate entity. The message is one of dynastic harmony and the promise of future stability. The reality, clearly, was rather different.

[5. Link to: Augustus and his Family](#)

[Family Tree—The Julio-Claudian Dynasty](#)

Gilding the Empire

While Augustus spent a deal of time during his reign accruing power while seeming not to, and perpetuating the principate, he also concerned himself with the regeneration of the Roman State. Given that he had restored peace and prosperity, and that he reigned unchallenged for forty-five years, he had plenty of time to transform the city of Rome and influence the improvement of towns and cities throughout the colonies and provinces of the whole empire.

As the empire's pre-eminent patron of the arts, his hand is most clearly seen in the field of architecture. Agreeing with Julius Caesar that Rome's buildings were unworthy of the city's position as capital of the empire, Augustus set about embellishing them. He was the first to use a new source of white marble from Luna (Carrara) in northern Italy. He also imported colored marbles from all over the provinces, which added luster to new Roman public buildings, as well as adorning older ones in need of repair. He claimed to have repaired no less than eighty-two temples during 28 BC alone. During his reign Augustus so improved the city's appearance that he justifiably boasted: "I found Rome built of sun-dried bricks; I leave her clothed in marble."

On the Campus Martius (Field of Mars), he repaired Pompey's Theater and two new ones were built, those of Marcellus and Balbus. In the same district, Agrippa built the Pantheon (later completely rebuilt under Hadrian), the first of Rome's great public baths, the Stagnum and Euripus, and the Saepta Julia. Among his many civil projects, Agrippa repaired the old aqueducts and built a new one, the Aqua Virgo. Augustus also built an aqueduct, the Aqua Alsietina, constructed to supply an artificial lake for naval displays. The Temple of Apollo on the Palatine, and the Temple of Mars Ultor (Avenging Mars) were only the most obvious of his prestige buildings. The latter was part of his great Forum, built because the two already in existence (Romanum and Julian) were no longer able to cope with the recent great increase in the number of law-suits caused by a corresponding increase in population. In fact, its need was so pressing that he had it opened before work on Mars Ultor had been completed.

There is no evidence of careful town planning in Rome, nor of a systematic housing program to cope with the swelling population, such as is evident in many other Italian towns like Augusta Praetoria (Aosta). Any major reorganization of Rome's crowded districts would have to wait until the great fire during Nero's reign (and then, that

was not much to the benefit of the citizens). Rome and the larger urban centers of the early imperial period were packed with tenement blocks called *insulae* (lit. islands). Built around a courtyard, with shops fronting the street, they were typically of three floors, although in Rome's poor Subura district they reached to six or seven stories. Each *insula* housed several families in cramped conditions, without the benefits of any sanitation. Augustus limited the height of *insulae* to five floors or a maximum height of sixty-eight feet. Fire from cooking was a continual hazard. An *insula* was constructed of timber frames and perishable mud bricks, which meant that they burned easily, and their height made them prone to disastrous collapse, burying the hapless victims of lower floors under tons of burning debris.

Augustus tackled the problem of essential services by dividing the city into fourteen districts under the control of magistrates elected annually by lot. The districts were further divided into wards under locally elected supervisors. Each district had its own administrative and technical services, and access to its own *vigiles* (fire fighters); the total for the whole city numbered seven thousand.

Augustus and the Army

The real base of the principate was the emperor's military power. Concern for its proper maintenance and for the effective channeling of its loyalties was, therefore, one of the chief goals of the Augustan settlement. Augustus continued the ongoing professionalization of the Roman military begun under Marius by establishing a standing field army comprised of twenty-eight legions (three were to be lost in Germany in AD 9), made up of volunteer recruits. Service was for a prescribed period (first sixteen, then twenty years), on a regular wage, and with fixed rewards on discharge. After 14 BC land grants were discontinued in favor of cash pension payments funded, after AD 6, by a new treasury, the *Aerarium Militare*. Under the reforms of Marius, military service had become a career choice in and of itself, but there were still uncertainties for citizen-soldiers. Under Augustus, these uncertainties were removed, and the greater intake of citizenry to leaven the mass of proletarian troops improved the overall quality of the soldiers enormously.

Augustus was careful to focus the loyalties of this new army in his direction. He achieved this by a number of methods. Since the founding of the Roman army in the time of the kings recruits swore an oath of obedience at their induction, but in typically efficient Roman style, this was sworn in full by only one recruit, with the others saying *idem in me* (the same for me) after him. Augustus now changed this, and for the first time the troops were obliged to take a personal oath of loyalty to the princeps instead, to be renewed annually at the start of each new year. With this oath the troops recognized Augustus as their sole paymaster and guarantor of their discharge rewards.

The army's commanders were handpicked legates of Augustus and its generals were members of Augustus's own family, men such as Agrippa, Tiberius, or Germanicus. He followed Julius Caesar's precept that an idle army is not only useless but also dangerous—boredom breeds disobedience. Therefore, Augustus kept the legionaries busy in major campaigns in Hispania, the Alpine regions, along the Danube and Rhine rivers, across the Rhine into Germanic tribal areas, and in numerous small-scale actions all along the empire's frontiers.

Despite Germanic activity across the Rhine, this was a period of relative peace, and Augustus never established permanent legionary garrisons on the frontiers. However, he at least removed the army from the center of power and began the process of keeping the legions in the vicinity of the frontiers—that is, essentially, out of the hands of

potential political trouble-makers in Rome. There is no evidence to suggest that he pursued an expansionist foreign policy. Indeed, he seems to have reacted only as circumstances and local conditions dictated, and preferred the traditional methods of making other nations “friends and allies of Rome,” rather than setting out to conquer. The bounds of the empire were not conceived as a bulwark against hostiles on the other side, they were simply the almost insurmountable obstacles presented by the two massive European rivers, the *Mare Britannicum* (English Channel), and the African and Syrian deserts.

The monopolization of army loyalty forced an important change in military tradition. As father of the state and commander-in-chief of the army, it followed that the glory of the triumph should be the princeps’ and the triumphing *imperator* was merely his junior partner. Anything exceeding this was an affront to the emperor’s *auctoritas*. Two incidents as early in his reign as 27 BC reveal the new order of things. Marcus Licinius Crassus, grandson of Caesar’s co-triumvir, had undertaken successful campaigns in 29–8 as governor of Macedonia. Awarded a triumph in 27, he went further in claiming the ancient honor of *spolia optima* (the most honorable spoils), awarded to a Roman commander who had slain his counterpart with his own hand. Earned only on three prior occasions in Rome’s history, the honor raised its recipient to the uppermost echelons of military glory. For Augustus it represented a potential challenge to his monopoly of the army’s loyalty, so he blocked the award on a technicality. Crassus was allowed his triumph but promptly vanished from the records.

In the same year the equestrian *praefectus Aegypti*, Gaius Cornelius Gallus—an Augustan appointment—tried something similar. Having successfully suppressed a serious revolt in the province, he celebrated his successes with statues of himself and bragging inscriptions. Enraged, Augustus let it be known that he no longer considered Gallus his friend. His social status and political career in ruins, his very life perhaps in danger, Gallus committed suicide (possibly in 26 BC). Both Crassus and Gallus had behaved fully within the boundaries of Republican precedent but had failed to appreciate a fundamental rule of the new order: there was to be no military glory but that of Augustus. In contrast, Agrippa, for so long Augustus’s right-hand man, repeatedly refused the ovations and triumphs granted to him; all his victories were celebrated by Augustus. And during his reign, although more than thirty triumphs were granted, it was always known that

they were his jointly with the triumphing commander—invariably one of the Augustan inner circle.

A military reorganization that would prove to have a profound impact on the future was that of the *cohors praetoria* (praetorian guard). The praetorians' origins went back to 133 BC, when Scipio Aemilianus—the man who finally destroyed Carthage in the Third Punic War—formed a personal bodyguard that became known as *cohors praetoria*, after *praetorium*, the area of a Roman military camp in which the consul-general's tent was pitched. By the fall of the Republic it was customary for all generals to have a cohort of praetorian guards, usually raised specifically for the campaign in hand and dismissed at its conclusion. Most were drawn from the infantry, although the more experienced could apply to become members of the *ordo equester* (order of equestrian knights). Augustus made a radical change to this institution by elevating the praetorians to a pivotal position within the military hierarchy. He combined the praetorian guard of his defeated opponent Antony with his own to form a total of nine cohorts consisting of four thousand five hundred men, with a small mounted contingent. These were stationed in towns around Rome to be deployed immediately in the event of civil unrest. They only entered the city in small units as protection for the emperor and members of the imperial family. To encourage loyalty, Augustus reduced their length of service by a quarter (twelve years, as opposed to the initial sixteen in the legions), and by AD 14 he was paying them treble the standard annual wage of 225 *denarii*. It is little surprise that the praetorians soon recognized the strength of their bargaining position.

Praetorian loyalty to Augustus was strengthened through daily contact. At first there was no overall command other than that of the principate. In 2 BC Augustus appointed two equestrian *praefecti praetorio* (praetorian prefects) to take joint control. Every afternoon one prefect received the day's watchword from the emperor in person at his house on the Palatine. When he had business in the city, units of the guard escorted him and his family, mingling with the crowds, ready to quash trouble. At this point they rarely appeared in armor—a sop to old Republican sentiments—but were easily identifiable from the formal cut of their tunics. As an imperial bodyguard, the praetorians wore, and used, their arms within the sacred *pomerium* (city boundary) of Rome—something denied any common legionary. This advantage catapulted the praetorians to an elite in the military

close to the seat of power. While, during the life of Augustus, they acted as a bodyguard, after his death the praetorians became the most formidable force in the making and breaking of emperors; as subsequent events will show.

The Augustan Administration

If the army was the real basis of the princeps' power, the legal foundation was Augustus's special commission from the senate and people of Rome. In theory the senate appointed the emperor, with the people ratifying the senate's choice. In reality, it was the other way around. Augustus promoted the notion that the senate governed the empire with the princeps as guide and friend, but after 23 BC his *imperium* exceeded that of any senatorial magistracy. However, Augustus set about increasing the powers of the senate in a way Julius Caesar would have never permitted. The senate became one of the two high courts from whose verdict there was no appeal, and it possessed legislative powers that had once belonged to the three arms of non-senatorial government, the *Comitia Centuriata*, *Comitia Tributa*, and the *Concilium Plebis*. New legislation was issued in the form of *senatus consulta*. As the title suggests, these were not strictly speaking laws, but resolutions passed by way of consultations, or advice, to magistrates. Since they were never ignored, they were de facto laws, and soon the senate acquired the right in full to make laws directly. However, the term continued in use, and later emperors usually issued their legislation in the form of a *senatus consultum*. The transfer to Augustus of the traditional powers of veto of the plebeian tribunes and the virtual removal of the tribunes from the legislative process further enhanced the senate's authority; but the ancient institution did not have it all its own way.

While refusing the office of censor—traditionally a whip-hand over the senate's composition and an overt image he wished to avoid—as a consul Augustus revived the ancient practice of *censoria potestas* to order the senate's structure to his own design. He increased membership to as much as six hundred, then a thousand, then cut it back again to six hundred. He established the practice of bringing in new men from all walks of life, as long as they were financially eligible. From 13 BC onward the minimum qualification was a million *sesterces*, but by imperial grant a poor but worthy *eques* could be adlected by the princeps and take his place in the senate. The enlarged senate provided more capable men to run the empire's huge administration—and as with the army, Augustus liked to keep its members busy. He appointed senators to newly created offices dealing with finances, the upkeep of public buildings, the roads and aqueducts, and the clearing of the Tiber.

Augustus also drew administrators from the non-senatorial section

of the elite, the *equites*, or equestrian knights. Posts created exclusively for equestrians included the command of the praetorian guard, the *vigiles*, and a prefecture to administer the corn dole (*praefectus annonae*). Accordingly, the *Ordo Equester* benefited enormously from Augustus's rule, and that of future emperors. Throughout his reign, Augustus consulted the senate frequently and treated it with respect. More significantly, he formed a *consilium*, or inner cabinet, from the two presiding consuls, a representation of minor magistrates, and fifteen senators chosen by lot. Nevertheless, as the historian Cassius Dio wrote "nothing was done that did not please Caesar."

Augustus was assiduous in the administration of justice, often remaining in court until nightfall—a long day during the summer months, since year-long the Roman working day lasted from sunrise to sunset. The existing laws that he revised and the new ones he enacted dealt largely with public extravagance, adultery, licentious behavior, bribery, and the encouragement of marriage in the senatorial and equestrian orders. The latter grew into an obsession with him. In 18 and 17 BC he imposed penalties on the plebs and especially the *equites* for remaining unmarried. There were financial benefits for those couples who produced children. These marriage laws may have been designed to counter a worrying drop in the birth rate of Roman citizens, but it is more probable that they were intended to regulate the lifestyle of the aristocrats, whose decadent ways in the late Republic had become notorious. However, his marriage legislation did not go unopposed. On one occasion, when there was open rebellion among some *equites* at a public entertainment, Augustus paraded the numerous children of Germanicus and Agrippina (Augustus's granddaughter) and made it clear that it would be a good thing if the knights imitated the young man's virile example.

Augustus's concern with a return to older Roman morals and virtues sponsored a religious revival. He resurrected festivals that had fallen into disuse, filled the gaping vacancies in the priesthoods, and repaired Rome's sacred buildings. In all this he was careful to avoid popular acclaim turning into worship of his person, even though this would have been a useful political adjunct. Ruler-worship was a common eastern practice, but Augustus knew the Romans would never accept it. Instead—in a move that would have lasting consequences for future emperors—he hit on the notion of combining the eastern practice with the western tendency to revere dead ancestors, such as Julius Caesar. This was expanded to permit the

worship of the imperial house in conjunction with the worship of the goddess Roma. So in the provinces the people worshipped “Rome and Augustus,” while in Rome citizens bowed before “Rome and the Deified Julius,” typified by the erection of the small *Templum ad Divus Iulius* (Temple of the Divine Julius) in the Forum.

In 12 BC there was a rapid extension to this Caesar-worship when the ex-triumvir Marcus Lepidus died. Augustus had allowed him to remain in his office of *Pontifex Maximus*, despite his living in exile, but now Augustus succeeded him, thus combining his secular powers with that of Rome’s most senior religious figure. The invention of the principate was now complete and formed the basis of absolute power for all subsequent Roman emperors.

Augustus the Man

Character portraits grow thinner on the ground in the later imperial period, but we have been left a wealth of detail on Augustus. We are told that he was a remarkably handsome man and “of very graceful gait even as an old man.” Even allowing for a modicum of sycophancy, his many statues bear this out (although none are known of him in older age...). On the other hand he was notoriously uncaring of his personal appearance, which may have been a natural tendency, but perhaps it was also a long-term reaction to the taunts of “pretty boy” that were thrown at him in his youth. As a young man there had been rumors of homosexuality, albeit from his enemies. Sextus Pompey sneered at his effeminate behavior; Mark Antony alleged that Julius Caesar made Octavian “willingly” submit to sodomy as the price of adoption; and Antony’s brother Lucius claimed Augustus had sold his body to Aulus Hirtius, the governor of Hispania Tarraconensis, for three hundred thousand *sesterces*. However, the same persons were eager enough to accuse Augustus of immodesty with women. Antony made much of the indecent haste with which Augustus had snatched Livia Drusilla from her husband, and also of his hauling an ex-consul’s wife from the dining room into the bedroom before her husband’s very eyes. Suetonius quotes from what he describes as “a racy letter” written by Antony to Augustus before the two had completely fallen out, defending his sexual relations with Cleopatra:

And what about you? Are you faithful to Livia Drusilla? My congratulations if, when this letter arrives, you have not been in bed with Tertullia, or Terentilla, or Rufilla, or Salvia Titiseia—or all of them. Does it really matter so much where, or with whom, you fuck?

As we have seen, Augustus was a man to proceed cautiously in everything he did (apart from marrying Livia, which, however, he did not repent at leisure). He regarded haste and recklessness as sins in his military commanders, and was fond of quoting proverbs such as “More haste, less speed,” and homilies like “Give me a safe commander, not a rash one.” It was a principle that he never fought a battle unless more could be gained by victory than lost by defeat. We know from his letters that he enjoyed gambling with dice, and he remained a womanizer into old age. But in almost every other respect, his habits were modest.

Unlike his successors, Augustus was content to live in a small *domus* (town house) on the Palatine. This first home disappeared

under the Temple of Apollo and the senate voted him a new house beside it and behind Livia's. It was called a "palace," but the compact rooms were unadorned by either the marble he was so fond of or tessellated floors. Even his holiday homes at Lanuvium and Tibur (Tivoli) were unpretentious, furnished by couches and tables "hardly considered fit for a *privatus*." He liked to give dinner parties, but always in the strict Roman tradition, and ate and drank sparingly himself. His favorite food was that of the common people: coarse bread, whitebait fish, fresh hand-pressed cheese, and green figs ("of the second crop"). The dinners were, however, jolly affairs because of his talent for bringing the shy into the conversation, and his own natural good humor.

He was also a noted scholar and writer, having studied rhetoric with great eagerness in his youth. He wrote numerous pieces of prose and poetry to general acclaim, and was happy to act as patron to other writers. Augustus sponsored a great flowering of writing activity generated by the development of literary circles of patronage that had been mostly in abeyance since the second century BC. Most famous among these patrons was Gaius Maecenas, a close associate of Augustus from the very beginning but one who never played an active role in politics. Among others, he supported the careers of Virgil and Horace.

Another circle of patronage formed around Marcus Valerius Messalla Corvinus, who promoted the careers of Tibullus and Ovid. While it should be accepted that this literary upsurge was a natural consequence of the new peace and prosperity, it is equally likely that Augustus—never a man to waste good talent—would have expected the writers to toe the political line. And there is the evidence of the irreverent Ovid—banished for affronting the new Augustan morality with his poem *Ars Amatoria* (Art of Love)—in comparison to Virgil and Livy, who both prospered. Virgil's *Eclogues* and *Georgics* wax lyrical on the Augustan restoration of peace to the Italian countryside, his legendary life of Aeneas, the *Aeneid*—a new national epic for the Romans, which quickly became de rigeur for every schoolchild—while the Republican sentiments of Livy's *Histories* could be so pronounced that Augustus jokingly referred to him as "my Pompeian." But this attitude toward Livy also suggests that, as with his political machinations, Augustus had no desire to exert overt influence over writers—such interference did not fit his careful policies, he much preferred to provide "encouragement" from the top.

While a naturally thrifty person, Augustus spent lavishly on public entertainments and encouraged the members of his family and inner circle to do the same, as was their Roman duty whenever they were elevated to some high office. He enjoyed cheerful people and often sought the company of small boys with whom he could enjoy a game of marbles. He particularly liked Moors and Syrians for their happy appearance, and loathed people who were dwarfish or in any way deformed, regarding them as freaks and bringers of bad luck. This predilection explains his treatment of his grandnephew, the future emperor Claudius, who of all his handsome family was the most ill-favored in stance and appearance.

Augustus passed away at his country villa at Nola in the afternoon of August 19, AD 14 at the age of seventy-five. In his long life he had totally transformed the Roman State and secured a hereditary succession. In his funeral oration, Tiberius compared Augustus to the hero Hercules; and in September—his birth month—he was voted the status of a god. From this time on he was known as *Divus Augustus*, the Deified Augustus, and joined his adoptive father Julius Caesar among the leading divinities of the Roman pantheon.

His testament proved that he had named his stepson Tiberius and his wife Livia as his heirs. It directed that Tiberius should take two-thirds of his estate and adopt the name Augustus, while Livia should take the balance and adopt the title Augusta; a division that was to cause some fractious problems between them. On the other hand, Tiberius was bequeathed an empire that enjoyed external security and internal peace, a constitution that Romans found acceptable, and an army that (not all willingly) hailed him as their commander because of his adoptive link to the sacred Julian bloodline.

Tiberius

Tiberius Claudius Nero Caesar

[*Princeps August 19, AD 14 to March 16, AD 37*]

There is some doubt as to when Tiberius was born; some accounts give it as the year of the consuls Marcus Aemilius Lepidus and Lucius Munatius Plancus, which would put it in 43 BC—they shared office with Octavian's brief seizure of the consulship after the battles around Mutina. But Suetonius cites the bulk of trustworthy opinion as preferring two years later, on November 16, on the Palatine hill in Rome (although his father Tiberius Claudius Nero would not have been present, since he was on campaign with Mark Antony). The Claudian gens, of which he was a member, had an ancient lineage that, according to one legend, dated back to the time of Romulus, the founder of Rome. Another puts the family settling in Rome at a later time, a few years after the expulsion of the kings in 509 BC. At the time of Tiberius, the Claudians had amassed twenty-eight consulships, six triumphs, and two ovations. Although several cognomina were used by the Claudians, the most popular were the Sabine word Nero, meaning "strong and energetic," and Drusus, dating from 283 BC, when its first holder killed an enemy chieftain called Drausus in single combat.

As a quaestor, Tiberius's father Nero brilliantly commanded Julius Caesar's fleet during the Alexandrine conflict of 48 BC (that settled the Ptolemaic dynastic conflict in favor of Cleopatra). Caesar rewarded Nero by appointing him to the high office of *Pontifex Maximus*, and granting him the right to found the colonies of Narbo (Narbonne) and Arelate (Arles) in Gaul. Later, we find him supporting Mark Antony's brother Lucius during the Perusine War. When Perusia fell to Octavian, only Nero scorned to capitulate. In the slaughter that followed he managed to escape and eventually took refuge in Sicily. However, the island was in the hands of Sextus Pompey, who spurned Nero as an ex-Caesarean. So he crossed to Italy and joined Mark Antony. When peace came, he returned to Rome in Antony's company. Octavian's forgiveness of his former enemy almost certainly carried a price. With Nero came his wife Livia Drusilla, who had borne him Tiberius Claudius Nero and was pregnant with Drusus Claudius Nero. Octavian determined to marry Livia, and it seems that Nero—not exactly in any position to argue—surrendered her and the children to him, and apparently died soon after.

For Tiberius it was a difficult childhood, being dragged from town

to town when Nero and Livia fled from Octavian's forces. His young life was almost snuffed out on several occasions: in Naples, Sicily, and even as far away as Sparta in Greek Achaea. However, as stepson of Octavian, soon to be Augustus, things looked up for Tiberius. He was honored at the age of fourteen by taking part in Octavian's triumph of 29 BC after Actium. Octavian sat him on the left-hand horse of the triumphator's chariot, while he placed his favorite, Marcellus, astride the more auspicious right-hand horse (Marcellus would soon be dead, so perhaps it wasn't such a good omen after all).

Tiberius and the princeps were to have a long, uneasy association. By all accounts Tiberius was an enigmatic and darkly complex figure, intelligent and cunning, but given to bouts of severe depression and grim moods. In this, he was the opposite of his stepfather, and his repressed Republican sentiments hardly helped their relationship. Nevertheless, Augustus did his traditional fatherly duty when Tiberius attained his majority, by leading him clad in his *toga virilis* into the Forum Romanum. At the age of seventeen, he became a quaestor and was given the Augustan privilege of standing for the praetorship and consulship years in advance of the age prescribed by law.

As was customary for young aristocrats, Tiberius soon began appearing in the law courts as an advocate. His civil career started with the successful defense of Archelaus, the Jewish king, at a court presided over by Augustus. He next appeared before the senate as advocate of three cities in the province of Asia that were appealing for public relief after an earthquake. Tiberius also acted as the prosecutor in the conspiracy case in c.23 BC against Fannius Caepio and Varro Murena, securing their convictions for treason.

Happily Wed, Horribly Married

At about this time, when he would have been about eighteen, he married Vipsania Agrippina, a union that seemed full of promise. On the political side, she was the daughter of Marcus Agrippa by his previous marriage to Pomponia, daughter of Cicero's friend Pomponius Atticus. But what was more important, the couple loved each other passionately—a rare occurrence in a world of arranged marriages. Soon after his wedding, Tiberius was sent to the Orient in 20 BC to evict the Parthians from Armenia and restore Tigranes, the Roman client king, to his throne. Next, he oversaw one of his stepfather's proudest successes. The Parthians, who had captured the eagles of the legions lost in the failed campaigns of Marcus Crassus (53 BC), Decidius Saxa (40 BC), and Mark Antony (36 BC), formally handed them back to Tiberius.

On his return to Rome Tiberius assumed praetorian rank before leaving to undertake the more senior service that was expected of a consul-to-be. For a year or so he governed Gaul Lugdunensis (probably still known as Gaul Commata, Gaul of the Long Hairs), late in 19 BC, where barbarian raids and feuds between Gallic chieftains had caused unrest. He also served with his brother Drusus in campaigns in the Alps, Pannonia, and in Germany. Tiberius proved to be a thoroughgoing if not inspired commander, and earned the respect of his troops—not that this would bring him much benefit at the time of his accession.

In 13 BC he became consul for the first time at the age of twenty-eight (some thirteen years before the traditional legal age for the office). His colleague, Publius Quinctilius Varus, was a relative of Augustus by marriage, but more famously the general who was to lose three of Augustus's legions to German raiders at the Teutoberg Forest in AD 9. Tiberius also became a father when Vipsania gave birth to a son they named Drusus.

However, personal disaster struck in the following year as a consequence of Marcus Agrippa's death. Augustus forced Tiberius to divorce Vipsania in order to marry Agrippa's widow, Julia. As Augustus's daughter, Julia was also Tiberius's stepsister (not to say also his recent stepmother-in-law)—the kind of tangled web so typical of the dynastic Roman families. After a short honeymoon period of mutual, if distant, contempt, they came to loathe each other bitterly, and Julia made little attempt to hide her ridicule of him as a man. Tiberius continued to moon about Rome after Vipsania until Augustus

had to ban him from ever seeing her again. For her part, Julia suffered no such constraints and began a series of scandalous sex affairs with handsome young men that were eventually to lead to her downfall.

Augustus put Tiberius back to work by giving him important military commissions in Pannonia and Germania in 12–6 BC, when he was successful in the field; although any glory was marred by the tragic death of his brother in 9 BC. Tiberius brought the body of Drusus back to Rome himself. He was consul for the second time in 7 BC together with Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso, and granted the *tribunicia potestas* in the following year. In essence, Tiberius had replaced Agrippa as Augustus's successor, but still only as the guardian of Agrippa's young sons, the Caesars Gaius and Lucius. At this point, he flung all his honors in Augustus's face, announced his withdrawal from public life, and went to live on the island of Rhodes with a small retinue of close friends and his personal astrologer Thrasyllus.

His reasons for this potentially dangerous move are unclear but there were several possible contributory factors. Julia's licentious behaviour disgusted him, not least because she made him such an obvious cuckold (except to Augustus, who remained either paternally blind or blissfully ignorant of her sexual shenanigans). His relationship with the young Caesars Gaius and Lucius was poor, and the precocious Gaius, half his age, made him out as a slow-witted boor, much as had the arrogant Marcellus made Agrippa feel at the end of his useful life. And then there was the influence of his domineering mother Livia, whose ambitions for her son far outstripped his. She had no time for Tiberius's Republican sentiments, nor his frequent brooding moods. His sadness at the loss first of Vipsania and then his light-hearted brother must have made the burden of coping with palace intrigue unbearable. Perhaps his apparent reluctance to succeed Augustus should also be taken into account. Although contemporary histories paint this as a fake sentiment to hide his real ambition, there were many occasions during his reign when he was unwilling to exercise power. His self-imposed exile to Rhodes could therefore be viewed as a sulky demonstration at being passed over, a retirement to mourn the death of his brother and his estrangement from Vipsania, or indeed a combination of all the above reasons. In any event, Tiberius soon came to regret his decision. But he was to be left to rot in the wilderness for seven years.

Never particularly fond of his stepson, Augustus's opinion of Tiberius now deteriorated and from then on he seems to have had

little patience with the exile. When he could no longer ignore it, Augustus is even said to have blamed Tiberius for Julia's unacceptable behavior on the grounds that he should have paid her more attention and produced some children. Something of Augustus's irritation is revealed by his repeated refusal to allow Tiberius to return to Rome after the latter realized the delicacy of his position on Rhodes; and this in spite of pressure brought to bear on Augustus by the persuasive Livia. To this point, Tiberius had been protected by his tribunician power, but when its term expired in 1 BC, it was pointedly not renewed. He now began feeling vulnerable, and with good cause. In Rome, young Gaius Caesar was beginning to stretch his political muscle. When Tiberius's name cropped up at a private dinner party attended by Gaius, a guest rose to say that if he [Gaius] gave the order he would sail to Rhodes and "fetch back the Exile's head."

Eventually, Livia's arguments won the day, and Augustus gave his consent to Tiberius's return to Rome when Lucius Caesar died in Massilia in AD 2. The story is told that his astrologer Thrasyllus, in whom Tiberius had lost all faith, was about to be pushed over a cliff by his irate patron when a ship was sighted sailing toward the island. Thrasyllus swore it brought good news. Tiberius decided to spare the astrologer's life until the nature of the news had been discovered, although the seer was quietly resigned to being ordered to take his life. Thrasyllus, therefore, was not the only reprieved exile when the ship put into port. Tiberius returned to Rome, but he was not immediately reinstated in Augustus's affections. Gaius Caesar had only given his assent to the return as long as Tiberius was kept out of the political sphere. And this remained the state of affairs until Gaius died fighting in Armenia in AD 4.

Once more Augustus turned to his dour stepson. Considering the nature of their relations over the years, it may be difficult to see why Augustus eventually relented and allowed Tiberius to become his nominated successor. Anecdotes of Augustus's impatience at Tiberius abound in the histories. He is quoted as saying: "Poor Rome, doomed to be masticated by those slow-moving jaws!" Yet the same man wrote to his stepson at the front with the words: "Your summer campaigns, my dear Tiberius, deserve my heartiest praise; I am sure that no other man alive could have conducted them more capably than yourself...."

For such a cautious and prudent man as Augustus to make a mistake in his choice seems unlikely. Perhaps he weighed up the good and bad in Tiberius and reckoned that the good tipped the scale. In

the summer of AD 14, when Tiberius was fifty-three, it was time to find out what Augustus's long planning had wrought.

[6. Link to: The Times of Tiberius](#)

[Family Tree: The Julio-Claudian Dynasty](#)

Tiberius Princeps

The reign got off to a poor start with a murder, a confused senate, a suicide, and an army mutiny. The exiled young Agrippa Postumus posed a dynastic threat, and there are differing perspectives on his death. Tacitus makes Tiberius responsible for his execution, without specifically blaming him. Suetonius says that the officer appointed to guard Postumus received a written order from Tiberius for the boy's execution, but allows that Augustus might have written it or even Livia in his name. Whether he knew about the execution or not, when the officer arrived to report that he had done his duty, Tiberius threatened to make him answerable for the unauthorized killing. On the other hand, Tiberius shelved the inquiry and the matter was forgotten, so perhaps he did have a hand in it. That Augustus himself ordered the execution of Agrippa and Julia's last-born son is perfectly possible. Even though the emperor had adopted him, he may have feared that leaving the exiled loutish Postumus alive would face Tiberius with a rival pretender. And Livia? Some sources go so far as to suggest she was behind the unfortunate deaths of so many Augustan favorites as far back as Marcellus. If so, it was all to see her son Tiberius on the throne, and Postumus would simply have been the last in a long line of nuisances.

Only after the matter of Postumus was resolved did Tiberius inform the senate of Augustus's death. He returned to Rome in the company of a cohort of praetorian guards to be greeted by the consuls Sextus Appuleius and (another) Sextus Pompeius, who were swift to swear an oath of loyalty and then administer the same to the senate, *equites* and people. The senate convened on September 18 to inaugurate the new reign. Such a transfer of power had never happened before and nobody, including Tiberius, appears to have known what to do. Both Tacitus and Suetonius agree in general if not in detail on what happened next. Tiberius professed great reluctance to assume the office. He even scolded his closest supporters for suggesting he should become emperor. The confused and probably alarmed senators lost their patience. According to Suetonius, many thought Tiberius was a dissembling hypocrite, and one senator was heard to cry out: "Some people are slow to do what they promise; you are slow to promise what you have already done."

Perhaps Tiberius was genuinely reluctant to become the princeps. He had never enjoyed the cloying offices of Roman administration over the freedom of military life. Perhaps he genuinely wanted to

leave the senate free to make its own decision on the grounds that it would at least provide a proper precedent for the succession. In any case, he was doing no more than had Augustus in 27 BC, when he had to be “persuaded” to accept the imperial powers. Unfortunately, where Augustus used tact, Tiberius came across as obdurate.

Nevertheless, he finally acceded to the senate’s wishes and accepted the title because there was no other suitable candidate for the job. However, he added that he reserved the right to resign later. This first meeting between the senate and Tiberius established a pattern for their later interaction. Throughout his reign, Tiberius was to confuse and frighten the senators. His actions and edicts seem to suggest that he wanted the senate to act on his implicit desires rather than on his explicit requests. If this was another attempt to imitate Augustus’s careful wielding of his *imperium* and *auctoritas*, it backfired and eventually turned into a farce. And for his part, Tiberius held no high opinion of his senatorial colleagues: “Men fit only to be slaves,” he said of them.

The Rise and Fall of Germanicus

Tiberius's disgraced wife Julia, despairing that her banishment would never be revoked now her last son Postumus was dead, committed suicide on the island of Pandateria to which Augustus had exiled her. But Postumus—living up to his name—had a sting in his tail. One of his loyal slaves almost persuaded the German legions to mutiny in his master's memory. Although he failed, military unrest did not subside.

The long reign of Augustus had accustomed people to the concept of a sole ruler, but there had never been a succession, and the change of emperors prompted the soldiers to demand a pay rise. Mutinies broke out in Germania and in Pannonia. Tiberius had asked the senate to confer an *imperium proconsulare* on his popular nephew and adopted son Germanicus, and put him in command of the armies of both Germania Inferior and Superior, each of four legions.

Son of Tiberius's brother Drusus, Germanicus was a popular commander with the troops, partly because of his nature, partly because of his Julian blood. His mother Antonia the Younger was the daughter of Mark Antony and Octavia, Augustus's sister. Born Nero Claudius Drusus on May 24, 15 BC, Germanicus earned his cognomen for a victory against German tribesmen in AD 13, and became Julius Caesar Germanicus on his adoption by Tiberius, according to the dictates of Augustus. He married early to Agrippina the Elder, daughter of Agrippa and Augustus's later-disgraced daughter Julia, and became a favorite with Augustus because of the number of children he fathered—nine in all. Three boys died in childhood, but the eldest, Nero Julius Caesar and Drusus Julius Caesar, later became heirs-apparent, and the youngest, Gaius (Caligula), became emperor after Tiberius. Two daughters, Drusilla and Livilla, were later involved in several scandals (not least being Drusilla's suspected incest with her brother Gaius) and conspiracy plots; the third, Agrippina the Younger, was to become the mother of Nero and wife of Claudius. The popular adulation heaped on Germanicus was never entirely deserved. While a capable military commander, he frequently showed poor strategic judgment and resorted to over-emotional blackmail in his dealings with the mutinous soldiers. Happier in the field, he was poorly suited to be a diplomat—a role he was soon to face with disastrous consequences.

Armed with his new powers, when he arrived back on the Rhine to deal with the mutiny, the troops in Germania Inferior begged him to become emperor, which he flatly refused to do. In Pannonia the three

legions were finally brought under control by Tiberius's son Drusus (the Younger), and Germanicus eventually managed the same on the Rhine. There were genuine grievances underlying these revolts that stemmed from under-payment of the legionaries (especially in contrast to the pampered praetorians), being retained long after terms of service had expired, and bullying by their officers. In the event, the troops received assurances that their complaints would be addressed.

With the immediate anxieties of the first succession in Rome's history put aside, Tiberius's early years were generally good. He remained true to Augustus's plans for the succession by promoting Germanicus over Drusus, his natural son. He behaved with discretion in his dealings with magistrates and the senate as a whole. He rejected any overtly sycophantic honors, such as the dedication of temples to his divinity. He declined to set the title *princeps* before his name or *Pater Patriae* after; and even refrained from adding the name Augustus to his own. His notorious parsimony resulted in legislation to cut down waste. He cut the expense of public entertainment by setting limits on the number of gladiatorial combats at many festivals; introduced price controls on household furniture; set an annual regulation on market values; and restricted the wasteful amount of food offered for sale in cook-shops. To set an example, he frequently served guests half-eaten dishes left over from the day before—which rendered an invitation to dinner a dubious treat.

Augustus's foreign policy had been one of conciliation, and Tiberius adhered to it resolutely. He refused to allow any extension of the frontiers, although Germanicus defied him in a series of trans-Rhenic campaigns in AD 14–16. In his defense, it might be said that Germanicus needed to take the soldiers' minds off the recent mutiny. But he was also in search of military glory unavailable on the mostly peaceful Gallic side of the Rhine. Besides, the loss by Varus in AD 9 of three legions still rankled. There was little Tiberius could do. As a Julian, Germanicus was popular not only with the German troops but also with the Roman populace; and he was son of the much-lamented Drusus (the Elder). The emperor finally brought his nephew to book by recalling him to celebrate a triumph on May 26, AD 17 and to load him with honors, including a consulship shared with Tiberius himself. Then, as soon as possible in 18, he packed Germanicus off to the eastern provinces with a *maius imperium*.

The task Germanicus faced was a diplomatic one, that of installing a Roman appointee in Armenia without damaging currently peaceful

relations with the Parthian empire. Tiberius had no high hopes of the heir-apparent's abilities in this respect, but was aware that sending someone of lesser rank would have been an affront to Germanicus. Accordingly he sent his trusted former consular colleague Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso to be governor of Syria with, Tacitus tells us, secret instructions to restrain Germanicus from any serious indiscretions. Technically, Piso was Germanicus's inferior and should have contented himself with offering advice. Unfortunately, he began meddling in arrangements already made by Germanicus and refused him military aid when it was requested. Piso may have thought he was acting rationally in the face of some very unwise and sometimes overbearing actions of Germanicus, not to mention with the support of the emperor. The upshot was that Germanicus ordered Piso out of Syria, but fell sick a few days after Piso had taken ship, and died the year after his arrival on October 10. With his last words he accused Piso of having poisoned him.

When Germanicus's widow Agrippina returned to Rome carrying her publicly adored husband's ashes, she declared Piso guilty of murder and hinted at Tiberius and Livia's involvement, claiming that they wanted his natural son Drusus to be his successor. Piso was put on trial by the senate, where he easily cleared himself of the charge of poisoning, but failed to get an acquittal on the charge of misconduct in his province and inciting the Syrian troops against his superior. In this, not even Tiberius could help him. Unable to see a way out, Piso committed suicide together with his wife Plancina. While the death of Germanicus could certainly be seen as fortuitous for Tiberius, Agrippina's accusations seem preposterous. Tiberius had always acted properly toward Germanicus, and if he had reservations about his headstrong but affable nephew, son—after all—of his own beloved brother Drusus, they certainly did not extend as far as having him murdered. Unfortunately, Piso's suicide—presumably to save the rest of his family and his estate—convinced many that he was guilty of poisoning Germanicus. Tiberius remained aloof from the proceedings, as did his mother Livia, although she was a close associate of Plancina. It was an absence that was also interpreted as the action of guilty parties.

Sejanus and the Growth of the Praetorian Guard

With Germanicus dead, Tiberius began, through the familiar Augustan methods, to elevate his own son. Drusus had married Julia Livilla, a daughter of Germanicus, so the twin sons she bore him in 19 (Tiberius Germanicus Caesar and Tiberius Caesar Gemellus) did have some Julian blood. Nevertheless, Drusus was, like his father, forced to recognize the prior right of succession of Germanicus and Agrippina's sons. A consulship came in 21 and in the next year the grant of *tribunicia potestas*. The year also marks the moment when Tiberius—now in his sixty-first year—began making long absences from the capital, leaving the administration in the hands of his son and the praetorian prefect, Sejanus, in whom Tiberius placed unbounded confidence. In a long catalog of rapacious men, Lucius Aelius Sejanus certainly qualifies as a nasty piece of work.

His date of birth is not recorded, but we know that Sejanus came from Volsinii in Etruria. On his mother's side he was descended from the old nobility and his father, Lucius Seius Strabo, was a wealthy equestrian. Sejanus first appears as a companion to Gaius Julius Caesar on his eastern mission of 1 BC–AD 4, which ended with the young man's death in Armenia. Tiberius made Strabo and his son joint prefects on his accession, and they shared the command until AD 15 when Tiberius appointed Strabo to the equestrian office of *praefectus Aegypti*, leaving Sejanus as the sole praetorian prefect. Through a combination of energetic efficiency, fawning sycophancy, and outward displays of loyalty, he gained the position of Tiberius's closest friend and advisor. Tiberius openly praised him as “the partner of my labors.”

Drusus, however, did not find co-operation with Sejanus easy. Agrippina's Julian party was agitating continuously against the Claudians, and Sejanus capitalized on the tensions for his own gain. Doubtless, Drusus would have foiled his intentions, but he died suddenly on September 14, 23, quickly followed by one of his sons, Tiberius Germanicus. Sejanus's wife Apicata later asserted that her husband had seduced Drusus's wife Livilla and persuaded her to poison Drusus. The seduction story, at least, seems true, for within two years Sejanus had divorced Apicata and asked Tiberius if he could marry Livilla. Tiberius refused to take this last step to ally Sejanus to the imperial family, but in every other respect he left the prefect a free hand. It was Sejanus who induced Tiberius to concentrate all nine cohorts of the praetorian guards into a single camp—the *Castra*

Praetoria just beyond the old Servian wall, a process that began in AD 23. Augustus had billeted the praetorians in small towns around Rome, but now Sejanus commanded some nine thousand troops stationed on the city's edge. As Sejanus's public profile became more pronounced, he had statues of himself erected in the Forum Romanum and other public places.

Under Tiberius the role of the *delatores* (professional informers) had expanded as a result of the revision to the law of treason made by Augustus, although he was reluctant to implement it. While at first, many treason trials seem to have been test cases to see how the new laws should be interpreted and were often quashed by Tiberius, Sejanus increasingly found them useful in pursuing his ends, and what amounted to a reign of terror developed, in which the *delatores* were allowed to run amok. The *delatores* were not confined to treason cases, but there was a personal advantage in them for the informer. After a successful prosecution, the informer was given at least a quarter of his victim's property, and such easy gains attracted the most unscrupulous men to invent charges against the wealthy. Now, under Sejanus's influence the *delatores* began to blight Tiberius's reign with their scandalous actions, as they would those of future emperors.

Tacitus dates the rapid degeneration of the reign to the death of Drusus, after which Tiberius's visits to his island retreat on Capri, encouraged by Sejanus, became more prolonged. In contrast, Suetonius claims that Drusus's vicious and dissolute habits offended his father, and that Tiberius was unconcerned at his son's death; he even cut the official mourning period before going back to business as usual. In 26 Tiberius left Rome for Capri, never again to visit the capital. His mother Livia was another cause for his retirement. Always the dominant force in his life, Tiberius resented her treating him as if he were still a child. She vexed him by meddling in the administration, which she saw as her right not only as the Augusta but by virtue of being the brains of the imperial family; and there was no denying that it was her house that was the center of life in the court, with her many preferred young men such as Servius Sulpicius Galba. When, angered by his obduracy, Livia produced some of Augustus's old letters and read out his unflattering comments on Tiberius's sour and stubborn character, the two parted in bitterness. Tiberius was only to visit Livia once more in the last three years of her life. He refused to attend her funeral in 29, withheld the bequests of her will, and vetoed her deification on the untrue grounds that she had

forbidden it.

With Tiberius out of the way on Capri, Sejanus was now the only route of access to the aging emperor, and acted as his voice in the senate. Any who dared question the prefect had only to glance over his shoulder at the menace of the praetorian guard. Sejanus began a regular persecution of the friends and family of Germanicus. Agrippina's never-ending fulminations gave him plenty of excuses. Tiberius seems to have approved; he too was tired of Agrippina's waspish tongue and fed up with the adulation of the senate and people for her sons, the two eldest of whom—the Caesars Nero and Drusus—would be the heirs apparent until Tiberius's remaining grandson Gemellus grew up. In rapid succession Nero and Agrippina were arrested and imprisoned on the island of Pandateria, and Drusus—for whom there should be little sympathy because he conspired with Sejanus in his older brother's downfall—found himself in turn arrested and imprisoned in the gloomy Palatine palace. These events took place in 27; Nero and Agrippina died in captivity in 31, and Drusus only survived them by two years; apparently expiring from deliberate starvation.

By the end of 27 Sejanus had reached the pinnacle of his power, and his actions to that time clearly point to a desire to become the princeps in place of Tiberius. However, the young princes of the imperial house were a major impediment in achieving his ambition. These were now Tiberius's grandson, Tiberius Gemellus, and Germanicus's remaining sons, Drusus Julius Caesar and the young Gaius. Drusus, of course was in prison, and the problem was solved by his death in 33. This left Gaius as the eldest heir-apparent. Events now moved swiftly. The voice of reason belonged to elderly Antonia, daughter of Mark Antony and Octavia, the emperor's sister-in-law and mother of Germanicus, with whom Tiberius had remained on good terms. When the stately matron told him of Sejanus's plotting Tiberius believed her, and acted.

The problem was clear: on Capri Tiberius had no forces, while in Rome Sejanus had the praetorian guard. Clandestine planning was essential. In 31 Tiberius granted Sejanus an *imperium consulare* and became his colleague in the consulship, the two awards that marked him out in the same way Augustus had Agrippa. The nineteen-year-old Gaius was called to Capri for his safety, and in October Tiberius dispatched the *eques* Maevius Sutorius Macro, commander of the *vigiles*, to Rome with the secret commission to replace Sejanus as

praetorian prefect.

When Sejanus was summoned to a meeting of the senate on October 18, he probably expected to receive a share of the *tribunicia potestas*, the final seal of the emperor's approval. But in an unexpected turn of events, the letter sent by Tiberius from Capri initially praised Sejanus extensively, and then suddenly denounced him as a traitor and demanded his arrest. Chaos ensued. Supporters of Sejanus headed for the exit, other senators were confused, fearing that this was another Tiberian test of their loyalty. At this point Macro, having replaced the praetorian guards, appeared with a cohort of *vigiles*, arrested Sejanus, conveyed him to prison, and shortly after executed him. The members of Sejanus's family were arrested and put to death in the witch-hunt that followed; followers and friends of Sejanus were denounced and imprisoned, or tried and executed; others committed suicide. As late as 33 a general massacre of all those in custody was still taking place. Livilla's end came when her grandmother imprisoned her in a room without food; noble Antonia paid her own penance by listening at the door as her daughter died of starvation.

The Reclusive Emperor

In 32 and again in 33 Tiberius left Capri for Rome, but turned back before reaching the city; otherwise for the remaining years of his life he stayed on the island. Many are the stories of his depravity with youths and young children of both sexes, and of appalling casual cruelty to any who offended him. It is worth bearing in mind that many of the ancient texts (particularly Suetonius and Tacitus) were written by historians living in a later age, whose autocratic rulers aspired to a high moral tone by playing up the excesses of their predecessors (this was to happen frequently).

Suetonius cites an anecdote of a fisherman who had taken the trouble to haul a huge mullet up the precipitous rocks to the imperial residence to present it to his emperor. Tiberius was so frightened by his unexpected appearance that he ordered his guards to rub the poor man's face with the fish. The scales skinned him raw, and the fisherman shouted in his agony: "Thank Heaven, I did not bring Caesar that huge crab I also caught!" Tiberius promptly sent for the crustacean and had it used in the same way. Tales like this may have come about as colorful explanations for the excesses of the *delatores* and the ramping up of the treason trials that followed in the wake of Sejanus's downfall, which certainly marred the later years of Tiberius's reign.

However, the accounts of his sexual antics seem at variance with the certainty that Capri was filled with scholars. Nor are they consistent with the extraordinary amount of hard administrative work that Tiberius put in right up until his death—even unloved Rome was well cared for. It was under Tiberius that the *praefectus urbi* (city prefect) of Rome became a permanent and important official, responsible for maintaining law and order with the *cohortes urbanae*, who policed the streets. This senatorial office eventually exceeded that of the urban magistrates, with his court supplanting theirs.

Tiberius created an efficient administration of the provinces through a series of prudent appointments. He extended the terms of governors, which lessened the temptation to get rich quick that had bedeviled the Republican period when governors only held the office for a year. Public building work may have been slack in Rome, but much was done in Hispania, Syria, Moesia, Dalmatia, and Pannonia, including the construction of new roads, bridges, and even whole cities.

Despite his aversion to spending, Tiberius showed generosity on

several occasions. He provided large subsidies in 19 so that the price of grain could be lowered. When a financial crisis arose in 33 because of a shortage of coinage in circulation, he lent the treasury a million *sesterces*, interest free, and spent a similar sum in 36 to repair the damage caused by a massive fire on the Aventine. In contrast, there was almost no spending on new public buildings apart from a restoration of Pompey's Theater, and a new temple to the Deified Augustus that went so slowly it remained unfinished at his death. He erected a huge palace on the Palatine, even though he spent almost no time in it and its fabric soon fell into disrepair.

Economies may have been forced on him because massive spending on military campaigns in the last years of Augustus's reign had left the *aerarium* depleted. Beyond the unauthorized trans-Rhenic campaigns of 14–16, Tiberius embarked on no wars of conquest. A Gallic national revolt under Julius Sacrovir was put down in 21–22, and North Africa obtained peace after seven years of guerrilla warfare between 17 and 24, caused by Tacfarinas, a man who had served in the Roman army. This situation became so serious that—since Africa was a senatorial province—the senate appointed the Pannonian commander Julius Blaesus to handle the matter. For defeating Tacfarinas in 22, Blaesus won the title *imperator*—the last time anyone outside the imperial house was permitted to receive the title. His army shattered, Tacfarinas ceased to be a nuisance, and was slain by a Roman force two years later.

In the matter of the succession, Tiberius was faced with a choice between his grandson Tiberius Gemellus, who at sixteen was too young, and his grandnephew Gaius, Germanicus's son. At twenty-three he was also young, but Gaius was of the Julian blood line. Tiberius, who held suspicions that Gemellus was actually the illegitimate offspring of Sejanus, solved the question by appointing both as his co-heirs. There are indications that he would have liked to pass over Gaius, whom he knew suffered from serious character flaws, but being a Julian made it unwise to do so. Tiberius gave Gaius no responsible offices and kept him at Capri under his watchful eye. Thus it was that, in 37, when Tiberius fell ill and feared his death was imminent, Gaius was in his company. The court hurriedly left Capri for the mainland but had only reached Misenum when at seventy-eight Tiberius died on March 16, and Gaius profited from it by being the heir on the spot.

Gaius Caligula

Gaius Julius Caesar Germanicus

[Princeps March 18, AD 37 to January 24, AD 41]

Gaius was born on August 31, AD 12, probably at the Julio-Claudian resort of Antium (Anzio), although both Tibur (Tivoli), east of Rome, and Augusta Treverorum (Trier) are given as alternatives. His father Germanicus was in his first of two consulships so he would have been constantly on the move, which explains the confusion over his son's actual birthplace. As a child on campaign with Germanicus, Gaius was nicknamed Caligula (Bootikin), which is how history knows him, because he wore the miniature uniform of a private soldier, including the *caliga*, or half-boot, of the infantryman. He was the youngest of the six boys born to Augustus's adopted grandson, and Augustus's granddaughter, Agrippina. His childhood was not a happy one, spent amid an atmosphere of paranoia, suspicion, and murder.

Instability within the Julio-Claudian house, generated by uncertainty over the succession, led to a series of personal tragedies. He was with his parents when his father died under suspicious circumstances in Syria in AD 19, after which relations between his mother and his granduncle, the emperor Tiberius, deteriorated. After Agrippina returned from Syria, Gaius lived with her in Rome until her arrest by Sejanus. The adolescent Gaius was then sent to live first with his great-grandmother Livia in 27 and then, following her death two years later, with his other grandmother Antonia. Shortly before the fall of Sejanus in 31 Gaius was summoned to join Tiberius on Capri, while his two older brothers, Drusus and Nero, and his mother Agrippina suffered persecution and, eventually, violent deaths. At the time of his accession he had held only two minor offices, that of a *pontifex* in 31 and an honorary quaestorship in 33, although ensconced on Capri neither counted since he was unable to undertake any official duties. Shortly before he was promoted to the pontificate, Gaius married Junia Claudilla, daughter of the distinguished senator Marcus Silanus.

Inevitably, there were rumors that Gaius was involved in Tiberius's death—or at least helped him on the way. The newly promoted praetorian prefect Macro, who had replaced Sejanus, was said to have connived, and this may have been true, although the allegations were probably voiced because of Gaius's fortuitous proximity to the emperor's deathbed, and later given strength by his unbalanced behavior. Certainly due largely to Macro's efforts, Gaius's succession

went smoothly and the senate voted him the imperial prerogatives on March 18, 37.

Of course, there was the obstacle of Tiberius's will, which named Gemellus as co-heir. Gaius wasted no time in having the will annulled on the grounds of the old emperor's insanity, which was not difficult in the light of the senate's suspicions of the austere and reclusive Tiberius and the popular glee that greeted the news of his death. This left Gemellus in an unenviable position, and his grandfather's bequest was to shorten his life considerably. Gaius entered Rome on March 28 amid scenes of extravagant rejoicing. For the Roman people this seemed like a dream come true. While the senatorial nobility was concerned at his youth and inexperience, having a true Julian as the head of state was more than compensation for the people and the *equites*.

His first acts as princeps were generous in spirit. He honored the bequests of Tiberius and those of Livia (which Tiberius had held up), ended the activities of the *delatores* and quashed any impending treason trials. He also paid a donative to the praetorian guard, the first they had received. This may well be viewed as a reward for not standing in his way to the principate; if it was, it was certainly not the last such gift from an emperor. He had the personal papers of Tiberius publicly destroyed, which no doubt implicated many of the Roman elite in the destruction of Gaius's own family, and then he gave Tiberius a splendid funeral. But when this was done, he had the ashes of his mother and brother Nero removed from Pandateria and brought to Rome. The most distinguished *equites* available carried the urns to Augustus's mausoleum, and Gaius decreed an annual day of remembrance, to be marked by games at which Agrippina's image would be paraded. He honored his father by renaming the month of September "Germanicus." His grandmother Antonia was granted all of the privileges Livia had received during her whole life (an irony, since he hated her and she loathed him—she had once caught him in bed with his sisters). Gaius adopted Tiberius Gemellus and made him *princeps iuventutis* ("first among the young"). This astute move it established that he alone and not the will of Tiberius could elevate the youth; and it also implied that he could remove the office if it pleased him. Gaius recalled exiles and reimbursed those who had been wronged by the imperial tax system. Finally, he pulled his forty-seven-year-old uncle Claudius away from his comfortable life as an historian and made him his colleague in the consulship, as well as insisting on

his marriage to Valeria Messalina, a beauty related to Augustus on both sides of her family.

In two policies diametrically opposed to his predecessor's methods, Gaius attempted to boost his popularity. First he lavished *congiara* (money gifts) on the mob, which he could well afford, since Tiberius had left the *Aerarium* with plenty of funds. Second he announced his intention to conquer the island of Britannia. This vigorous foreign policy following the caution of Augustus and the sedentary Tiberius proved hugely popular with the Romans and was a precedent that many later emperors were to follow. The average Roman regarded bravery displayed in war as an emperor's most laudable quality. Young, generous, and Julian, Gaius basked in the love of his people. Yet within four years he lay dead in a palace corridor, murdered by the very men entrusted to protect him.

From Good to Bad

The ancient histories are unanimously hostile toward Gaius, perhaps most eloquently summed up by a marvellous line from Suetonius: “So much for Caligula the Emperor; the rest of this history must needs deal with Caligula the Monster.” This makes it difficult to distinguish between fictional invective, histrionic lampooning, and possibly factual writing. It seems that within months of his accession in 37, Gaius fell seriously ill—probably from a nervous breakdown of some kind—and emerged from it a changed man. We are told that he insisted on being treated as a god, that he would stand beside the shrine of Castor and Pollux in the Forum Romanum to be worshipped by all visitors, and then established his own shrine nearby. He had a life-sized golden image displayed, dressed in clothes identical with those he happened to be wearing. It was his habit to commit incest with each of his three sisters in turn, his favorite being Drusilla. When she suddenly died—he may have had a hand in it—Gaius had her deified. He used his two other sisters, Agrippina the Younger and Julia (usually known as Livilla), as prostitutes for his courtiers, and then had the nerve to banish the girls for committing immoral acts—although they were also accused of conspiring against him.

Suetonius tells us that Gaius was tall for his build, with a pallid complexion and a badly built, hairy body. His forehead was broad and forbidding and, despite his youth, he was almost bald on top, about which he was so self-conscious that he made it a capital offense for anyone to look down on him from above. With sunken eyes, hollow temples, a thin neck, and spindly legs, Suetonius gives a splendidly vituperative portrait, which he may have garnered from contemporary writings, or merely elaborated on the several statues that survived Gaius’s downfall. Given the propensity for Greco-Roman sculpture of the period to favor accuracy (although a degree of sycophancy must have been present, especially with a mercurial personality like Gaius), the statues depict a young man of more general appeal. The best, however, wonderfully suggests the latent teenage bully, coupled with a grim determination. Perhaps Suetonius’s description dates from the last year of his reign, when dissolute living and the ravages of Julian-inherited epilepsy that frequently struck him down had taken their toll.

Too much may have been made of his illness, but by the end of 37 he had come to ignore the senate and its powers, and enjoyed humiliating senators and *equites* alike. Gaius did away with the

advisory senate committee, his *consilium*, abrogated to the principate the senate's right to issue coinage, and even made senators prostrate themselves before him as if he were an oriental potentate. It seems as if he was justifying his behavior by the divine right of his Julian blood, and notions of an oriental-style monarchy may not have been far from his thoughts, since his most intimate advisor was the Jewish prince Herod Agrippa I.

By early 38 there was much uneasiness among the aristocracy at the way Gaius was establishing an absolute monarchy. Men who traditionally had a share in the government could no longer even offer advice and those that presumed to do so were invariably executed on the flimsiest of excuses. This even included Macro, who found himself increasingly divorced from the affections of the princeps he had helped make. Eventually Macro was tricked into giving up his command of the praetorians and forced to take his own life.

Aware of the sentiments being muttered around him, Gaius resurrected the treason laws and used them to hunt down the most aristocratic Claudians, whom he suspected of fomenting rebellion. The obvious focus was Tiberius Gemellus, although a serious plan to elevate him in place of Gaius seems unlikely and it is more probable that Gaius's antics were promoting designs for a republican coup. In one anecdote, suspecting that Gemellus had been taking precautionary emetics against the poison Gaius intended to administer, he scoffed: "Can there really be an antidote against Caesar?" Evidently not; Gemellus was executed in May 38.

Late in 39, Gaius returned to his military campaign plans and went north to the Rhine frontier, scene of his father's victories. The excuse that he needed to strengthen the frontier was a plausible one. Uncharacteristically, Tiberius had made poor appointments to the governorships in the region and discipline had suffered. However, the real reason was to deal with a plot against him, instigated by Marcus Aemilius Lepidus (a twice-removed nephew of the triumvir), widower of Drusilla and lover of her sister Agrippina the Younger. Gaius's third sister, Livilla was also implicated. Lepidus had gained the support of the *legatus legionis* of Germania Superior, Lentulus Gaetulicus, but in an unusually well timed move, Gaius arrived on the frontier before the two could join up. The appeal of the Julian Gaius worked its magic and the mass of legionaries rallied to him under the command of two praetors, the stern disciplinarian Servius Sulpicius Galba and the inspired thirty-year-old strategist Titus Flavius Vespasianus.

Gaius passed the winter of 39–40 in Gaul while the legions put a stop to tribal forays across the Rhine, and then began the invasion of Britannia in the spring. The histories paint this campaign as a ludicrous farce. Having gathered his forces on the Gallic coast, Gaius had the legions drawn up in battle array on the beach facing the sea. No one had any idea what his intentions were, when he suddenly ordered the men to gather up shells—the “plunder from the sea”—in their helmets. The resulting hoard was to be taken back to Rome and presented in his triumph. This absurd incident has taxed modern historians, for it seems unlikely that the hardened soldiers would have accepted such an affront to their dignity, even from the young Julian god. The historian J.P.V.D. Balsdon offered his own theory in 1934 as to what may have happened by positing that the Roman troops—ever fearful of the sea—simply refused to board the waiting galleys. The same thing was to happen to Claudius two years later, but unlike his uncle, Gaius had little time for the troops to recover their nerve because events in Rome were overtaking him and he had to hurry back. Gaius was able to put a brave face on it, however. Good fortune placed in his hands Adminius, son of Cynobelinus a British king, who had been banished by his father and came over to the Romans with a handful of followers. Gaius sent a dispatch to Rome that made it sound as though the entire island of Celts had surrendered to him.

[7. Link to: Caligula the Monster](#)

A Reign of Despotic Cruelty

On his return to Rome, he resurrected the *delatores* and treason trials became the order of the day, primarily intended to raise money. Tiberius had left Gaius a fortune, but three and a half years of extravagance had squandered it, and the military campaigns, far from bringing in any new revenue, had bankrupted the emperor's *fiscus*, the emperor's personal purse. Accordingly he used the treason laws to secure convictions of wealthy senators and *equites*, and to confiscate their property. Other methods of raising money included imposing swingeing taxes and using praetorian guards as tax-gatherers in place of the appointed officials. The emperor held auctions of theatrical props, for which senators were forced to bid ludicrous prices; he also taxed foodstuffs, porters, and prostitutes. A favorite money-raising operation was to honor a wealthy man by appointing him to the college of priests to Gaius's own godhead and then charge him an exorbitant fee. Failure to comply resulted in execution and the confiscation of property. Gaius enjoyed inflicting great physical and mental pain on those he intended to execute, and in this his cruelty knew no bounds. He was particularly fond of inviting parents to witness their sons' executions, and when one father excused himself on grounds of ill-health, kindly provided a litter for him.

There was, however, some merit in Gaius Caligula's government of the provinces. He continued Tiberius's road-building program in Gaul, Hispania, and Dalmatia. But in general he proved to be as erratic abroad as at home. He particularly preferred Herod Agrippa I, granting the Jewish prince the tetrarchies of his uncles, Philip and Herod Antipas, an action that contributed to subsequent rebellions in Judaea. His ignorance—or complete disregard—of Jewish sensibilities stirred up trouble when he ordered that his statue be erected in the Temple at Jerusalem. Only the delaying tactics of the Syrian governor, Publius Petronius, and the tactful intervention of Herod Agrippa prevented riots and a potential uprising in Judaea. In the event Gaius was dead before the order could be carried out, but the damage had been done. Toward Armenia he showed weakness in allowing Parthian influence to spread, while in Africa he quickly stripped the province of its senatorial status—the only public province that had a legion—which was then assigned to an imperial legate.

Gaius was now universally hated and no one was safe from his arbitrary actions. Only the praetorians held him in any affection because of the donation at his accession and subsequent extra benefits,

and yet it was from this direction that his end was to come. Macro's death had created a vacancy, but Gaius had not appointed a new prefect, and the acting commander, a veteran named Cassius Chaerea, had good reason to hate his emperor. Chaerea was the victim of Gaius's insults, teases that implied the tough old soldier was effeminate. On requesting the day's password, Gaius used to give him obscene words like "cock" or "cunt," and forced him to kneel as the emperor waggled his middle finger suggestively for a kiss. Gaius, too, had marginalized the elite of the praetorians by insisting on a personal bodyguard of captured German tribesmen, captained by Thracian officers. It may seem odd, but these wild barbarians reveled in his godhead and were fiercely loyal to the emperor.

On January 24 , 41, just past midday, Gaius left a theater performance for luncheon. Guided by friends to choose a narrow passage linking the theater to the palace, the young emperor was separated momentarily from his Germans and Cassius Chaerea struck him down with a sword thrust to the neck, while another guards officer, Gaius Sabinus, stabbed him in the breast. Having ruled for only three years and ten months, at the age of twenty-eight Gaius Caligula died in a pool of his own blood. Frenzied praetorians then seized the empress Milonia Caesonia, whom Gaius had married (his fourth wife) in 39, killed her and snatched her infant girl child, and swung her by her little ankles to bash her brains out against a column.

There is evidence that the praetorian officers were not alone in the assassination plot; a group of senators, headed by the ex-consul Lucius Annius Vicinianus, was also behind them. The senate he had so humiliated and bullied took revenge by repealing all his acts, although his successor prevented them from damning his memory. The reign of Gaius may represent an endeavor to establish that his autocratic will was now the Roman law, and the more ludicrously insane of his actions—even if exaggerated by later historians—were little more than the petulant whims of a callow youth demonstrating that he could do whatever he liked. The claims that he had intended to make his beloved race horse Incitatus a consul smack more of an irresponsible adolescent prank aimed to prick senatorial pomposity than a really determined intention. But the bridge of ships he had built across the bay at Baiae in 39 was real. Dressed in Alexander the Great's breastplate, Gaius rode across the bay like a god, an extravagantly theatrical advertisement of his divine power. What the reign makes most clear is the degree to which the senate had come to depend on

the emperor and the level of tyranny that was inherent in the Augustan model of the principate. After Gaius, the Roman State would always be at the mercy of the princeps, and the empire's fortunes would wax and wane as a direct consequence of the qualities of a single man.

Claudius

Tiberius Claudius Drusus Germanicus / Tiberius Claudius Caesar
Germanicus

[Princeps January 26 AD 41 to October 13, AD 54]

Claudius's birthright reads like that of a crown prince. On his father Drusus's side he was the grandson of the Augusta Livia; his mother Antonia was the daughter of Mark Antony; his grandfather by marriage the emperor Augustus; his uncle the emperor Tiberius; and his older brother Germanicus was marked out for the succession. But Claudius was unfortunate in health. He was born on the first day of August 10 BC at Lugdunum (Lyons). A serious illness in childhood accompanied by a period of paralysis left him with an unattractive appearance. He is said to have drooled, walked with a limp, had a runny nose, stammered, and habitually trembled. Physical disabilities such as these were more than sufficient to make his handsome family think him mentally defective, and his embarrassed parents did everything to keep him out of the public eye. However, this seclusion afforded Claudius a rare luxury for one of his family: ample opportunity to study. He became an accomplished historian, producing books on Etruscan, Augustan, and Carthaginian history. None has survived.

Antonia was ashamed to be seen with him, often calling him a monster and accusing others of stupidity by exclaiming: "He is a bigger fool than even my son Claudius!" Livia treated him with scorn and Augustus worried constantly whether he would reflect badly on the imperial family. In a memorandum to Livia (which he intended she should pass on to Antonia) regarding the upcoming festival of Mars Ultor, he wrote:

We both agreed that an immediate decision ought to be taken. The question is whether he has—shall I say it?—full command of his five senses. If so, I can see nothing against sending him through the same degrees of office as his brother [Germanicus]; but should he prove physically and mentally deficient, the public must not be given a chance to laugh at him and us.

Due to these concerns Claudius remained under the same kind of guardianship as would a Roman daughter, even after he had reached his majority. There is evidence, however, that Augustus suspected there might be more to his "idiot" grandson than met the eye. Again to Livia:

I'll be damned if your grandson Tiberius Claudius hasn't given me a very pleasant surprise! How on earth anyone who talks so confusedly can nevertheless speak so well in public—with such clearness, saying all that needs to be said—I simply do not understand.

But Augustus, ever cautious of his image, nevertheless kept Claudius away from the important offices young males of his family usually enjoyed, so he spent his childhood and youth in almost complete isolation. When he assumed the *toga virilis*, for instance, he was carried to the Capitol in a litter at night, instead of being led into the Forum Romanum by his father. Despite these impediments, it seems he was respected by those who knew him best both for his mind and a certain spirit of nobility. And he did fill some minor offices. Under Augustus he was made an augur and presided at several games. Under Tiberius he obtained the insignia of a consular (although when he pressed for the duties as well as the empty title, Tiberius replied that the forty gold *aurei* he had sent were meant to be squandered on toys). His nephew Gaius made him his colleague in a two-month consulship, the senate had honored him more than once, and he was fairly prominent in the *ordo equester*.

Claudius had inherited some Julian blood from his grandmother Octavia, but he may well have escaped execution throughout the dynastic struggles because he was far more of a Claudian. Since only the Julian house could count on the support of provincial armies, his chances of becoming emperor had always seemed slight, and his threat negligible. Was he involved in the plot to kill Gaius? There is no evidence to prove or disprove his complicity, and it may merely be happenstance that he was in the same theater as Gaius on that fateful day in January 41 and that he left only moments before the doomed emperor. To have been a partner in the conspiracy seems too bold a move for reclusive Claudius. And in the events that followed, he comes across as a passive participant.

In the aftermath of the assassination—the first open murder of a Roman emperor—there was widespread panic and confusion. The emperor's German bodyguard went on a killing spree. Fortunately, Claudius was discovered cowering behind a curtain in the palace by a praetorian guard. His colleagues (perhaps even those who had just murdered Caesonia and her daughter) gathered up the hapless Claudius and carried him off to the safety of the *Castra Praetoria*, where he was shortly proclaimed emperor. A republican at heart, Claudius was said to prefer this version of events because it made his

accession an accident of fate, absolving him from accusations that he wanted to perpetuate the principate. Another version paints the praetorians in a more decisive role. Fearing that their beneficial terms of military service were in jeopardy because of a republican coup, they seized on forty-eight-year-old Claudius as the only surviving mature member of the Julio-Claudian house and sent out troops to find him. Either way, Claudius is portrayed as the reluctant partner in the whole process.

Meanwhile, the news of Gaius's death prompted a senatorial discussion about restoring the Republic and dispensing with the principate altogether. The heated debate was halted when the senators heard that the praetorians had made the decision for them. The senate was again obliged to recognize the impotence it had faced when dealing with the military dynasts of the late Republic, and the meeting dissolved with the empire's fate undecided.

At a later meeting in the Temple of Jupiter Victor senatorial numbers were depleted, since many had fled the city to their country estates. The senate had three or four *cohortes urbanae* under the command of the urban prefect, numbering perhaps three thousand men. With these and some armed freedmen they occupied the Forum Romanum and Palatine, thus acknowledging that supreme power in post-Augustan Rome could be achieved only by military force. But the urban guards deserted to the praetorians, with whom they shared the *Castra Praetoria*. The outcome was inevitable, and on January 25 ,⁴¹ a group of senior senators went to the camp to pay their respects to Claudius and formally invest him with all the powers of the princeps.

The basic fact of the principate—implicit in the Augustan settlement but always carefully disguised—was now made plain: the emperor's position ultimately rested on the sword and not on the consensus of the senate and people. As will become clear, the sword was often double-edged. Forever afterward, emperors ruled under the sufferance of the troops they commanded, and a loss of army loyalty necessarily entailed a forfeit of power, usually accompanied by the loss of the incumbent's life.

Passive and reluctant he may have been, but Claudius wasted no time in establishing his rule. The immediate concern was to identify himself with the Julii, and so he assumed the name of Caesar, a popular choice with the army, Roman mob, and provincials but hated by the senatorial nobility. Since he had no legal right to claim it, the adoption of "Caesar" marks the first step in the word's transmutation

from a cognomen to a title meaning ruler. He made the association stronger by having Gaius's murderers executed, but acted with generosity toward those senators implicated in the plot. The treason trials were stopped, and exiles, including Gaius's two sisters Agrippina and Livilla, were recalled. The absurd taxes introduced by Gaius to refurbish the *fiscus* were abolished, and to further please the people vast spectacles were provided in the Circus Maximus. There were, however, at least six plots against his principate, and we are told that Claudius executed thirty-five senators and between two to three hundred *equites* in the process of suppressing them. He probably survived these through a wise policy of courting the praetorian guard. In addition to the large donative on his accession, perhaps as much as twenty thousand *sesterces* to each soldier, he continued the annual top-up established by Gaius and expanded the number of cohorts from nine to twelve. Nor were the legions ignored. The soldiers were given more opportunities for booty, and awards were showered lavishly on many units.

In all, thanks to Claudius's decisive and coherent policy, which must have surprised his detractors, and a lack of cohesion among the senators, the brief chance of a restoration passed. And it speaks eloquently of how far seven decades of the Augustan principate had removed Rome from the possibility of a return to the so-called free Republic.

Britannia Invaded

Claudius followed his nephew's example and wasted no time in pursuing a bold foreign policy to further popularize his new reign by announcing his intention to annex the island of Britannia. While the campaign was being organized, Claudius ordered the suppression of a new revolt in Mauretania. Under the command of the legates Suetonius Paulinus and Hosidius Geta, this was accomplished and Mauretania divided into two procuratorial provinces, Caesariensis and Tingitana.

A full-scale invasion of Britannia was presented as the completion of Julius Caesar's unfinished business (and probably a snub to his nephew's failure), and that it would give Rome unfettered access to important slave, hides, and metal markets. In fact, these benefits were greatly exaggerated. The island was not an unknown quantity. Roman-style coinage was already in widespread use by the Belgic and Celtic tribes and trade between Britannia and Gaul well established. A generation earlier in his *Geographical Sketches*, Strabo had written:

Though Rome could have taken Britannia she declined to do so. In the first place the Britons are no threat, having insufficient strength to cross over and attack us. In the second, there would be little to gain. It seems that we presently get more out of them in duty on their exports than we would by direct taxation, especially if the costs of an occupation army and of tax collecting be discounted.

Glossing over this, Claudius found a political excuse for action in 42. The Roman client king Verica was defeated by Caratacus and Togodumnus, the other sons of the British ruler Cynobelinus, and fled to Rome from his kingdom in what is now West Sussex. This left the whole of southeast Britannia under Cynobelinus's control, a theoretical challenge to the empire. Managing the northwestern colonies required a divide-and-rule strategy that insured the incessantly quarreling barbarian tribes never became strong enough to make common cause and engage imperial forces. If Cynobelinus allied with the Gauls, argued Claudius's advisers, it would be a recipe for rebellion.

In 42 preparations for the invasion were complete, but delays occasioned by the troops' reluctance to embark—a replay of the same problem faced by Gaius two years earlier—meant that the actual crossing took place in the spring of 43. Under the command of Aulus Plautius Silvanus three legions of experienced Rhine troops—II Augusta, XIV Gemina, and XX Valeria Victrix—joined IX Hispania,

which had been transported from Pannonia. The gap this created along the Rhine was filled by raising two new legions: XV Primigenia and XXII Primigenia. With auxiliaries and units from other legions, the task force numbered some fifty thousand men.

The landing took place at Rutupiae (Richborough in Kent). From there the four legions fought their way north, halting at the Tamesis (Thames) to await the carefully stage-managed arrival of the emperor. It was eight weeks before the imperial bandwagon, complete with war elephants, caught up with them, by which time all immediate resistance had been crushed. Claudius continued unchallenged to Camulodunum (Colchester), Cynobelinus's capital, where he held a victory parade. Sixteen days later he left the new province in the hands of Plautius and returned to Rome.

When the conquest resumed in the spring of 44, it was the young legate Vespasianus (Vespasian), who had supported Gaius in 39, who claimed the glory. The rebel leader Caratacus was captured by Britannia's second governor Scapula in 51, but it would be another century before the north and west of Britannia were fully brought under military domination, and Caledonia (Scotland) would remain largely free of Roman control. The bloodiest revolt was led by Boudicca (or Boadicea), Queen of the Iceni—"tall, terrifying, with flashing eyes, menacing voice, and a wild mass of yellowish hair falling to her waist," according to the historian Cassius Dio—who burned, hanged, crucified, and slaughtered seventy thousand people in the Romanized southeast. However, by Claudius's death in 54, the Romans controlled almost all of Britannia south of a line drawn from east to west through Lindum (Lincoln), excluding Wales.

Boudicca was eventually defeated by Suetonius Paulinus, governor from 58 to 61, and hers was the last great British challenge to Rome's superiority. Ultimately, the legions would be forced out not by rebellion, but through the inexorable structural decay of an embattled empire.

Claudius the Reformer

Claudius celebrated his triumph in 44, his military credentials firmly established. He was keen to stress that his principate was one of military achievements. In addition to the annexations of Mauretania and Britannia, he extended Roman influence in the state of Palmyra, situated between Syria and the Euphrates, annexed Lycia in 43 and the allied client kingdoms of Judaea in 44, Thracia in 46, and Ituraea (an area between the north of Judaea and the plains of Damascus) in 49, which was incorporated into Syria.

In the case of Judaea, the actions of Herod Agrippa I led to the kingdom's incorporation. The client prince had grown up at Rome as a pampered princely hostage of Augustus and had been awarded tetrarchic lands in Galilee by Gaius Caligula. There is some indication that he was beneficial to Claudius during the days after Gaius's murder and he was rewarded by the additional grant of Judaea and Samaria. He fell from grace, however, when he suspiciously extended Jerusalem's walls and invited other oriental kings to a conference at Tiberias. When he died suddenly in 44, his former kingdom came under direct Roman rule. Claudius was not entirely opposed to the Augustan concept of client kingdoms, however, establishing some on the borders of the new British province and giving Comagene to Antiochus IV. But the relationship of these kings to the emperor was made clear by their official titles of *legatus* (or *procurator*) *augusti*.

Claudius also continued the policies of Julius Caesar and Augustus of founding colonies (largely populated by army veterans) to extend the Romanization process in the imperial provinces, which were lagging behind the senatorial ones. Colonies were established in Mauretania, along the Danube, and in the west, the most famous being Augusta Treverorum (Trier) and Colonia Agrippina (Cologne; the spelling used here is a shortened form of either Colonia Agrippinensis or more fully Colonia Claudia Ara Agrippinensum) in Germania Inferior. Tiberius's road-building program was also continued and extended all over the empire. Claudius encouraged further Romanization by beginning a process that would become a contentious feature of later principates, that of granting Latin rights to tribal groupings that were deemed ready for the benefits and the tax obligations.

One act that was to have far-reaching consequences was his ruling that wealthy Gallic noblemen were eligible for senate membership as long as they were Roman citizens. There was no immediate flood of

tribal chieftains to Rome, however, since the mass granting of citizenship rights and extending the senate to non-Italians was deeply unpopular with the Roman senatorial nobility, and a deal of passive resistance toward the ruling was evident. But it is hard to put the genie back in the bottle, and it must have been self-evident that this generous extension to the tribal nobility of Gaul would soon apply to the local aristocracy of other regions of the empire.

In Italy, Claudius was responsible for several major construction programs, the most significant of which included a new harbor (Portus) to replace nearby Ostia, which had become too silted for use, and two new aqueducts for Rome, the Aqua Claudia and Aqua Anio Novus. It was also during his reign that new roads were built, the Via Claudia Valeria to the Adriatic coast, and roads over the western and Julian (eastern) Alps. The biggest undertaking was the draining of Lacus Fucinus (Fucine Lake). Historical sources are at pains to highlight the almost catastrophic outcome of this brave but doomed project, but its scale cannot be denied. Intended to provide much needed farming land, thirty thousand men were employed in the work for eleven years. Suetonius's assessment that "his public works were grandiose and necessary rather than numerous" is appropriate.

Claudius always emphasized his resemblance in efficiency and administration to Julius Caesar and Augustus. Unlike his immediate predecessor, he made haste slowly, preferring evolution instead of revolution, which went a way to placating the senatorial class. His relations with the senate were generally cordial—at least on his side—and he treated its members with courtesy, and avoided parading his pre-eminence overtly. He only held the consulship four times during his reign (42, 43, 47, and 51), and did not demand divine honors, although he did not refuse permission for provincials, especially in Britannia, to worship him on the pragmatic grounds that they would anyway. Claudius strengthened the powers of the princeps in a low-key way in which he could point to both ancient and recent precedents to justify his actions. Because of his absences from Rome, Tiberius had been obliged to appoint various secretaries to look after administrative business, such as reading petitions and supervising inheritance tax. The annual appointment of magistrates under the Republic was a system of government for a simpler time; it could not supply a stream of trained and experienced men to administer the numerous adjuncts of business created by the expanding state. Claudius began to recruit a new civil service to help in his work, a

reform that inevitably centralized more power in the hands of the principate.

The most noticeable changes came in the area of public finance, which had hitherto been split between various financial bureaux. These were now united under one central *fiscus*, or imperial treasury; even the *Aerarium Saturnii* (public treasury) was brought under the emperor's domain in 44, by its removal from the control of senatorial *propraetors* and its restoration to equestrian *quaestors*. While this had ancient precedent, what was new was that the *quaestors* were the *princeps'* nominations and served for three years instead of the traditional one. Almost all forms of taxation were transferred to the *fiscus*, and offices of state were created to organize every aspect of imperial policy, from the emperor's personal correspondence to the management of the State Library.

The recruits to the Imperial Civil Service came from the ranks of the *equites*, but imperial freedmen held the most important posts. The histories are united in portraying Claudius as a dupe to his ex-slave secretaries (as well as to his wives). It is possible that Claudius's reliance on his freedmen may have stemmed from his suspicion that the aristocracy was untrustworthy. But it is more likely that he appreciated the native intelligence and experience of the slaves with which he had earlier surrounded himself, and rated their abilities more highly than those of any aristocrat. For whatever reasons, there is no doubt that Claudius's reign is the first era of the great imperial freedman.

This type of secretariat had existed before Claudius, but centralization meant that freedmen now wielded more power than they would have done under Augustus or Tiberius. His closest advisors were Greeks: Pallas, financial secretary; Narcissus, secretary-general; Callistus, legal secretary (who had gained prominence under Gaius); and Polybius, the privy seal. On occasion, these men even sat in the senate to represent the emperor's interests. In this, we might see a further humbling of the senate, but Claudius's main concern appears to have been efficiency in government, and that is evident in all his widespread legislation, which he preferred to enact as *senatus consulta* rather than by imperial fiat. The senate was again allowed its ancient right of issuing copper coinage and recovered the right to conduct the elections that Gaius had given to the people (which had replaced the defunct elections of the ancient *comitiae* years before).

[8. Link to: Family of Claudius](#)

Family Tree: The Julio-Claudian Dynasty

The Wives of Claudius

While Claudius the princeps was a considerable success, his domestic life was something of a shambles. One bride-to-be, Livia Medullina, died on her wedding day. Claudius then divorced his first two wives, Plautia Urgulanilla and Aelia Paetina (the sister of Sejanus). Aelia bore him a daughter, named Antonia, whose first husband, Cn. Pompeius, would be executed by Claudius and the second, Faustus Cornelius Sulla, by Nero. The elder Pliny would fruitlessly implicate Antonia in the Piso plot against Nero (see later) before the emperor finally had her killed as a revolutionary—the daughter of Claudius would always pose a threat to childless Nero. Claudius had his third wife, Valeria Messalina, the beauty Caligula forced him to marry, executed after she cuckolded him, and was poisoned by the fourth, his niece Agrippina the Younger.

Messalina bore Claudius two children, a daughter, Octavia, in 39 and a son, Tiberius Claudius Caesar Germanicus, in 41, who was recognominated Britannicus in commemoration of his father's conquest of Britannia. The marriage, which had been arranged by Gaius Caligula for purely mischievous motives, was otherwise not a success. Claudius already knew of Messalina's lax sexual reputation when he married her in 38, so it is unlikely that he was duped into the role of blissful cuckold that Suetonius and Tacitus suggest. The union was politically useful because she was of Julian stock and he no doubt tolerated her misplaced passions for that reason. What he was unable to overlook, however, was Messalina's proclivity for palace intrigue. While Claudius was visiting Ostia in 48 to inspect progress on his new port, Messalina held a palace party in the course of which a form of marriage ceremony was performed (or play-acted) between herself and the consul-elect, Gaius Silius. Reminded of the similar conspiracy of Marcus Aemilius Lepidus and Agrippina the Younger in Gaius's reign, Claudius ordered their immediate executions, along with others implicated in the plot, including the prefect of the *vigiles*.

There is no clear record of Claudius's desire (or lack of it) to remarry, since at the age of fifty-seven he might be thought to have been content to remain single and name Britannicus his heir. However, he was probably mindful of the need for someone with more Julian blood to succeed him. In any event, Messalina's death initiated a scramble among the freedmen, each wishing to place his preferred candidate at Claudius's side as the new empress. His intimate friend Lucius Vitellius argued for Agrippina the Younger, forcefully backed

by his financial secretary—Pallas had good reason to support Agrippina for she was his mistress, and the union was unlikely to spoil their relationship, while at same time it would strengthen his position in the hierarchy. For Claudius, the infatuation for Agrippina suggested by the ancient histories seems improbable. As the daughter of Germanicus she was his niece, as sister to Gaius he was well aware of her reputation as one of her brother's court prostitutes and of her affair with Lepidus that had resulted in her banishment. Agrippina had been married to Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus, scion of a powerful but dissolute Roman family, some thirty years her senior. By this marriage she had an eleven-year-old son, Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus. Pallas waved aside the fact that under Roman law such a marriage would be incestuous—he got the appropriate statutes changed—and Claudius saw the sense in a union that brought to him a direct descendant of Augustus with strong Julian connections. However, Agrippina's ambitions for her son proved to be the undoing of Claudius.

Agrippina's powerful personality dominated Claudius's last years. She was the daughter, after all, of Germanicus's wife Agrippina the Elder, who had caused Tiberius so many headaches, and she had inherited her mother's volubly imperious temperament. In addition, she had survived the vicissitudes of her brother's arbitrary reign and probably felt that dealing with the aging Claudius would be simple by comparison. The aim, of course, was to see her son on the throne in place of the younger Britannicus, but more than that to rule the empire through him. She began her campaign of personal advancement immediately after the marriage in 48 and, with the active help of Pallas, soon became influential enough that her image began to appear on official inscriptions and coins. In 50 the senate voted her the title Augusta, the second prominent imperial woman so honored since Livia; and Livia had only earned it after Augustus's death. Official documents prove that Agrippina even greeted foreign embassies to Rome from her own tribunal, and also wore a gold-embroidered military cloak at such functions. The extent of her influence can be seen in the naming of the new town in Germania Inferior that bore her name, Colonia Agrippina.

Shortly after her marriage to Claudius, Agrippina's son Lucius was betrothed to the emperor's daughter Octavia, and in 50 Claudius adopted the youth with priority over his own son Britannicus, who was five years the junior. There is every indication that Claudius loved

his natural son, but the fact was that Lucius had more Julian blood in his veins. Lucius now took the Claudian names of Nero Claudius Caesar Drusus Germanicus as his own. In 51, when he was only fourteen, he assumed the *toga virilis*, was named consul elect for the year 58, and was given the title of *princeps iuventutis*. In 52 he became *praefectus urbi*, made his first senate appearance in 53, and married Claudius's daughter Octavia later in the same year. Claudius also took the precaution—as Tiberius had done—of appointing a loyal man, Sextus Afranius Burrus, as praetorian prefect to safeguard Nero's succession when the time came.

At this point Claudius was sixty-three, but seems to have been fit and well for a man whose mother—had she been a real ancient Roman matron—might have had him put down after his childhood sickness. For Agrippina this posed a problem. Were he to live for another ten years or so there would be sufficient time for Britannicus to grow up and Claudius to alter the priority of the succession. And this was not an empty threat, since the secretary-general Narcissus, in opposition to Pallas, was urging Claudius to designate Britannicus as his heir. But there was another possible motive for hurrying her husband to his grave. Nero at sixteen was beginning to show signs of intractability and if she had to wait much longer for him to become emperor he would no longer need nor heed his mother's advice and Agrippina would lose her hold over him.

On October 13, 54, a month into his sixty-fifth year, Claudius died of poisoning. Some said his personal taster, the eunuch Halotus, administered the fatal dose, but most fingers pointed in Agrippina's direction. According to the senator and author Gaius Plinius Secundus (Pliny the Elder), she supposedly paid a notorious poisoner called Locusta to doctor a dish of mushrooms, but Pliny loathed the Augusta, so his accusations are suspect. In his translation of Suetonius's *The Twelve Caesars* Robert Graves mentions a treatise by Gordon Wasson which claimed to prove conclusively that Claudius died from eating an edible *boletus* cooked in a sauce of a similar poisonous variety. Apparently he then vomited this up and was poisoned a second time with the juice of a *colocynth* (wild Palestinian gourd) administered both orally and as an enema. And then, just to make sure, he was smothered.

Claudius turned out to be the most enigmatic of the Julio-Claudian emperors. His reign was graced by stability and good government at home and in the provinces, and the successful management of client

kingdoms. He was careful, intelligent, aware and respectful of tradition, but given to bouts of rage and cruelty. He was willing to sacrifice precedent to expediency, while using precedent to justify his actions. And, despite an apparently amiable disposition, he was utterly ruthless in his treatment of those who crossed him. Augustus's suspicion that there was more to his "idiot" step-grandson than met the eye was more than fully borne out by the events of his unexpected reign. In almost universal gratitude—there were some detractors, notably Nero's tutor Seneca—he was accorded divine honors after his death, the first since Augustus to be so distinguished.

Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus / Nero Claudius Caesar Drusus
Germanicus*[Princeps October 13, AD 54 to June 9, AD 68]*

More than any imperial reign, Nero's provides the most fertile ground for dramatization. Characterized by extravagance, despotism, promiscuity, and madness, it ended the Julio-Claudian dynasty and plunged the Roman world into another civil war. In the areas of government and the economy little of merit was achieved and much damage done: insurrection in the provinces, rampant inflation, devaluation, the mass murder of Christians, to mention a few evils of the reign. Appropriately, history has left us with the image of the insane emperor, playing his harp while watching Rome burn.

Many of Nero's vices were probably inherited, although as a self-acclaimed artist-performer, he was more than capable of presenting them on a broad stage. In Rome's early history there were two branches of the gens Domitii: the Calvini and the Ahenobarbi, the latter named by the founder, Lucius Domitius. Tradition has it that he was the first to know that the Romans had won the important battle of Lacus Regillus (498 BC), when two gods told him. To prove that they were gods, they stroked his black beard and turned it to the color of bronze, after which the family always used the cognomen Ahenobarbus (red- or bronze-bearded). The family was peculiar in only having two praenomina, sometimes repeating and sometimes alternating between Lucius and Gnaeus. Down the centuries the Ahenobarbi earned a reputation for rudeness, bad temper, casual cruelty, and dissolute behavior. The best of the bunch was Nero's great-grandfather—a Lucius—who commanded with great bravery the conspirators' fleet in opposition to Julius Caesar. His grandfather—another Lucius—was Augustus's chief executor, and noted for his extravagance and arrogant rudeness. His father Gnaeus, a cheat, liar and violent man, was simply regarded as despicable.

The future emperor was born at Antium (Anzio) on December 15, AD 37. Acknowledging the predicted nature of his newborn son, Gnaeus told a companion that any child born to him and Agrippina the Younger was bound to have a detestable nature and become a danger to the public. Lucius grew up in poor circumstances after losing his father at the age of three and seeing his mother banished by Gaius Caligula, who then seized the child's estate left him by his father. His aunt Domitia Lepida raised him and, according to

Suetonius, she chose a dancer and a barber to be his tutors, which goes some way to explaining his obsession with performing music and dance, not to say with his appearance. In his adolescent years this unsuitable education was somewhat rectified when Claudius rescinded Agrippina's exile. On her return she appointed to be his tutor the stoic philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca, a man whose writings took a high moral tone that contrasted starkly with the greed, expediency, and even connivance at murder that shaped his life. With the accession of Claudius, Lucius had his fortune restored to him, and with his mother's marriage to the emperor, he became Nero and the heir-apparent.

Over eighty years of the principate had accustomed the Roman State to an imperial succession, and Nero's went smoothly, thanks to Sextus Afranius Burrus, the praetorian prefect, who ensured the acclamation of the praetorian guards, and a compliant senate voted the sixteen-year-old the imperial powers. The provincial armies were not expected to contest the accession of a great-great-grandson of Augustus, and none did. The praetorians were duly thanked for their loyalty with a donative no less than that of Claudius. Nero then spoke to the senate, promising to restore the Augustan principle of the division of powers between princeps and senate. Seneca, of course, wrote the speech for him.

For a while, these promises seemed to be observed, but largely because the youthful Nero was content to leave the boring matters of state to someone else, principally Seneca and Burrus. At the same time, Nero's mother Agrippina was busy eliminating any possible family rivals, including his aunt Domitia Lepida and the great-grandson of Augustus, Marcus Junius Silanus, who was proconsular governor of Asia. For his support of Britannicus, the freedman Narcissus was driven to suicide rather than face inevitable execution. However, Tacitus observed that Nero was saddened by this because "the greed of Narcissus and his extravagance harmonized admirably with his own still latent vices." Britannicus was still too young to be considered an immediate threat and was spared; besides, he was the emperor's brother-in-law, which afforded him some comfort... temporarily.

Nero demonstrated all the usual indulgences of a privileged young aristocrat, who, after a deprived childhood, has suddenly come into a fortune. Besides his passion for all things aesthetic, he enjoyed the pleasures of alcohol and promiscuous sex. His close companions

Annaeus Serenus, the *praefectus vigilum*, and a young noble called Marcus Salvius Otho, joined him on nightly hunts through the streets of Rome in search of unwary young women. Once cornered, the maiden dared not refuse the advances of her emperor, even though—barely disguised—the pretense that it was not he was maintained.

His marriage to Claudius's daughter Octavia did not prevent him from having a freedwoman called Acte as his mistress. It would appear that Seneca, no longer able to exercise his duties as a tutor as he had when his charge was younger, found Nero's nocturnal frolics useful in keeping him out of the business of running the empire. Both Seneca and Burrus had supported Agrippina while Claudius was alive, but now they were less certain of her temper. Agrippina's ambition to be the sole regent was getting in their way, and having coinage struck showing her on the obverse in partnership with her son was going too far.

The Degeneration of Nero's Court

Nero was also tiring of his mother's presumption of power, for her portrait was banished to the reverse of later coins and then vanished altogether. This was the result of Burrus and Seneca working on Nero's morbid fear of rivals and their suggestion that, as master of the world, he had no need to share power with anyone—including his mother. Agrippina's habit of sitting beside Nero to handle meetings with ambassadors on his behalf was curtailed, and her supporter Pallas was removed from office. As her power waned, Agrippina played her trump card and switched her allegiance to her stepson Britannicus. But it was a poor hand, and in 55 Britannicus died of poisoning—probably administered by the very Locusta that Agrippina had employed to get rid of Claudius. Agrippina was accused of treason but brazened it out, although Nero made his mother remove herself from Rome, leaving the government effectively in the hands of Seneca and Burrus. For a period of five years after Agrippina's banishment, the empire's affairs went well and it was a time of general happiness and prosperity.

Little reference is made in the contemporary histories to Nero's government of the provinces, and it is likely that he had no interest in them. The only item of note is that the Ligurian client kingdom of Alpes Cottiae was fully absorbed into the empire on the death of its ruler Cottius, probably in 58. That life in Rome was sweet was entirely due to the abilities of Seneca and Burrus, and the fact that Nero—so long as his regents assured him everything that was done extended from his divine beneficence—was happy playing the lyre and chasing young men and women around Rome with the worst of intentions. But baleful influences were at work in the form of Poppaea Sabina and Gaius Ofonius Tigellinus (he had been exiled in 39 by Gaius Caligula for adultery with Agrippina, but who returned to find preferment with Nero). The beautiful Poppaea Sabina's influence was the first to be felt. She was the wife of Nero's nocturnal companion Otho (although the histories disagree as to whether she was his wife or his mistress), but he had been conveniently sent to govern Lusitania, and with him out of the way she became Nero's lover in 58. In support of the argument that Nero engineered his friend's removal from Rome, Otho was only a quaestor, a rank below praetor or consul, the minimum requirement to be a provincial governor, suggesting that Nero conspired to have him appointed.

Poppaea Sabina's first act was to persuade Nero to get rid of his

mother, in whom she rightly perceived a dangerous rival. Seneca and Burrus had been busy hinting at the same end for some time, and Nero had developed a virulent hatred of Agrippina. After a foiled attempt to drown her—rather absurdly by making her sail on a ship designed to fall apart in the sea (a good swimmer, she was rescued by a fishing vessel)—the prefect of the Misenum fleet had her assassinated. Seneca persuaded the senate that Agrippina had been plotting against her son's life. It is unlikely that anyone believed this fiction, but neither was anyone inclined to argue the point.

Having got away with matricide it seemed as though Nero could do anything, and shook off all restraints. These soon included Seneca and Burrus, with whose condescension and advice he had grown impatient. No doubt at Poppaea's urging he forced Seneca into retirement on the occasion of Burrus's death in 61. The young emperor, now twenty-four, had tired of his marriage to Octavia. He divorced her on the grounds that she was barren, which may have been true, and adulterous, which was unlikely, then exiled her. Octavia was executed shortly after and Nero married Poppaea. He then appointed his counselor of the past months, Tigellinus, to the joint command of the praetorians (with a certain Faenius Rufus) from which position he exerted a further degenerating influence on Nero.

Licentiousness, unbridled extravagance, and bisexual sensuality now became court features. Suetonius paints a lurid picture in which the emperor, not content with girls, seduced free-born boys and raped a Vestal Virgin. He tied men and women to stakes and attacked their genitals while dressed as a wild beast, and went through a sham wedding with a boy named Sporus, who was castrated to make him into a "girl" for the event.

For once, the ancient histories are probably right, if not in detail almost certainly in general. However, brutal gladiatorial sport—as often portrayed in Hollywood films—did not much feature because Nero was more interested in the games and athletics of the ancient Greeks. A lavish building program began with the construction of Greek-style gymnasia on the Campus Martius and in the Vatican Valley. This un-Roman predilection for watching athletic sport was accompanied by a growing zeal for the performing arts. Actors of the age were considered lowly, vulgar types, but Nero seized any opportunity to perform in the theater, prohibiting anyone to leave, or snooze, while he was playing or orating on the stage.

9. Nero's Rome

Family Tree: The Julio-Claudian Dynasty

Toward Civil War

Historically, the most famous event of Nero's reign is the great fire of Rome. The conflagration erupted on the night of July 13, 64, and over the period of almost a week it wiped out three of the city's fourteen regions and badly damaged a further seven. The legend that Nero "fiddled" while Rome burned stems from a contemporary report that, after returning from Antium where he had been when the fire started, he watched the flames from the Tower of Maecenas and sang a composition of his own about the Sack of Troy. There was widespread belief that the emperor started the fire in order to clear space for a grandiose new palace. While this is understandable, because he did immediately begin construction of the Domus Aurea (Golden House), Rome's largest palace complex ever, it is contradicted by Nero's actions. The emperor dashed back to Rome, and was evident in his encouragement of the *vigiles*. And new regulations that insisted on wide balconies to allow fire fighters access to large buildings date from Nero's time. However, the persistent rumors of arson only show how low in people's esteem the emperor had fallen, and Nero's massive spending on his new palace fueled public hatred.

He decided to redirect speculation by making members of the Christian sect in Rome the scapegoats. Many Christians were rounded up, smeared with pitch, tied to stakes, and set on fire. At a series of nocturnal games held in the Vatican Circus and the imperial palace grounds, blazing Christians were used as torches, while others were torn apart by wild beasts in the arena. But the exercise backfired. The public, even though hardened to scenes of gladiatorial death in the arena, were so sickened by such carnage that they turned their anger on Nero.

The costs of building the Domus Aurea and other similar projects spiraled out of control. The *fiscus* became hard-pressed to cope, inflation increased. A devaluation of the gold *aureus* by reducing its weight by ten per cent proved to be only a temporary solution, so Nero resorted to the Caligula formula of murdering men whose wealth he needed. Unbridled by any sensible advice, the treason trials began again, presided over by Tigellinus, who organized cohorts of the detested *delatores* to hasten charges and convictions against wealthy *equites* and senators. Nero's readiness to eliminate opposition through murder rapidly created an atmosphere of paranoia. In 65 the pot boiled over and a conspiracy was hatched to replace Nero with Rome's most popular figure, the wealthy, charming senator Gaius Calpurnius

Piso. But the plot was uncovered, thanks to the efforts of a praetor-designate named Marcus Cocceius Nerva, who had heard whispers of its imminence. The authorities tortured a few conspirators, who then revealed the names of their fellows. At least nineteen were either executed or driven to suicide, including the poet Marcus Annaeus Lucanus (Lucan), Nero's ex-tutor Seneca, and the co-praetorian prefect Faenius Rufus.

Tigellinus continued with a free hand to suppress Nero's enemies, unhindered by his new colleague, Gaius Nymphidius Sabinus, who was appointed in the same year. Since opposition now existed in every sphere of the population, it only served to drive the emperor's unpopularity to a new high. Every class of citizen hated him, and in the provinces the neglected army had lost all faith in his rule. His habit of appointing his oriental freedmen as legates did nothing to endear him to the common legionary, and in every sector there were continual rumblings of discontent. In the reign of terror that followed the Piso conspiracy, virtually all of Rome's remaining nobility was wiped out, obliging Nero's successors to create a new aristocracy. In an almost unending list of victims, one of the best known was Gaius Petronius, author of the *Satyricon*, whose louche description of Trimalchio's Dinner perfectly sums up the greedy, sexually lax atmosphere of Nero's court. Another was Annius Vinicianus, accused of leading a conspiracy aimed at replacing Nero with the celebrated legate Corbulo. Poppaea Sabina also died in 65 after receiving a bad-tempered kick in the stomach from Nero while she was pregnant; but this was obviously an accident.

In September 66 Nero decided to make himself scarce by traveling to Achaëa, where his artistically Greek heart lay. However, the emperor's hasty departure did nothing to lessen the terror of Tigellinus, who unwisely eliminated some popular figures, most notably Corbulo, who was ordered to take his own life. Tigellinus failed to appreciate just how revered by the troops and populace the general was.

Gnaeus Domitius Corbulo (c.AD 7–66) was a scion of an Italian senatorial family. His early military career is unrecorded, but he had been co-consul with Gaius Caligula in 40, his brother-in-law by the emperor's marriage with Milonia Caesonia, Corbulo's half-sister. He himself was married to Cassia Longina and their daughter Domitia Longina was to become wife of the emperor Domitian. In 47, Claudius had appointed him *legatus pro praetore* of Germania Inferior, where he

had been successful in suppressing rebellions of the Cherusci and Chauqi tribes. During this time, Corbulo had ordered a canal constructed to link the Rhine to the Maas/Meuse. Called “Corbulo’s canal,” it is still visible today.

After a period spent in Rome, Corbulo had been sent to govern Asia province in 52. In the previous year, the Parthian empire had received a new king, Vologeses (Arsaces XXII), who had established his brother Tiridates on the Armenian throne in place of the Roman client Radamistus. At first Nero’s advisors Seneca and Burrus had done nothing, but in 55 an opportunity had presented itself when Vologeses had faced a revolt inside Parthia by his own son Vardanes. Corbulo had been dispatched to deal with Armenia, but taken almost two years in recruiting new troops and knocking into shape the ill-disciplined legions (III Gallica, VI Ferrata, and X Fretensis) which had been sent to him from Syria. For five years Corbulo had waged a series of successful campaigns that had taught the Parthians respect for the might of Roman arms. In 63 Tiridates had been persuaded to accept Nero as his nominal suzerain, and he visited Rome in 66 only months before Corbulo’s death to receive his crown from the emperor. The terms of the peace, which were to last for half a century, established the courtesy of Parthia appointing the king of Armenia and Rome actually installing him as a client of the empire.

For his sweeping successes, Corbulo had become a hero among his own troops, and his victories made him the most celebrated general of his day with the public. It was this eminence that led to his undeserved death. To this point, the pogrom had mostly affected only the senatorial and wealthy equestrian classes. This senseless act caused the soldiers of legions on every front, disaffected by their treatment and angry at being ignored by their emperor, to raise their voices in outright hostility.

Nero—blissfully unaware that his henchman Tigellinus had quietly fled Rome in advance of a lynch mob—remained unconcerned. In Achaia he involved himself in a frenzied whirl of athletic competitions and musical diversions in which he always desired to be awarded the first prize. Reality was no longer a concept that Nero understood, so he did not care that in Greek competition merit, not social standing, was supposed to be rewarded; he even won the first prize in competitions he never attended. So overwhelmed was he by his adoring reception that, on November 28, 67, he proclaimed Achaia liberated. It was not free of the empire, but released from the

province of Macedonia and received immunity from taxation. The liberation of Achaëa had consequences in the west among the Gauls, who considered theirs the senior provinces of the empire. The affront to Gallic pride was sufficient for the standard of rebellion to be raised, and the insurgency soon spread to Hispania and Africa.

Nero's plans to travel further east to visit Egypt were halted when a serious revolt broke out in Judaea, which had been on the boil ever since Gaius Caligula insisted on raising his statue in the Temple of Solomon. And then to make matters worse, the rebellious proconsul of Africa, Clodius Macer, furious at Nero's tyranny, cut off the supply of grain to Rome. With supplies still coming from Egypt, this should not have been a disaster, but it was turned into one by the incompetent administration of a freedman named Helius, who had taken up the reins of government from Tigellinus. Thus was Nero's unwilling return to Rome forced on him at the beginning of 68. Abandoned by Tigellinus, odious to the mob for the innumerable executions, and quite unable to disentangle the administrative chaos caused by Helius, Nero had run out of options.

His only hope of survival lay in the loyalty of the praetorian guards, but in this he was to be cheated. In the final act Sabinus, the remaining praetorian prefect, promised the guards a massive donative of thirty thousand *sesterces* per head in the name of Galba, the *legatus pro praetore* of Hispania Tarraconensis. With the populace set firmly against him and open mutiny among the legions, the senate declared Nero a public enemy and declared for Galba on June 8, 68. The shamed emperor fled to the suburbs where on the following day, lacking the courage to take his own life, he ordered his loyal freedman Epaphroditus to stab him. The Julio-Claudian dynasty ended as Nero fell, uttering the words, "What an artist I die." His long-suffering but faithful mistress Acte buried him anonymously in the Ahenobari mausoleum, just outside the Servian Wall on the side of the quiet Pincian Hill.

YEAR OF THE FOUR EMPERORS

[AD 68–70]

Galba

Servius Sulpicius Galba

[Declared April 6/, AD 68; Augustus June 8, AD 68 to January 15, AD 69]

In the spring of 68, the governor of Gaul Lugdunensis, Gaius Julius Vindex, began canvassing provincial commanders to join him in open rebellion against Nero's rule. As a romanized Gaul he raised the standard for a nationalist movement, aiming to win for Gaul by force what Nero had bestowed on Achaëa. However, his cry was also for freedom from tyranny. The local militia and Gallic tribes supported him with the exception of Lugdunum (Lyons), which remained loyal to Nero, and in March, Vindex besieged the wealthy colony. His appeal found support with the governor of Hispania Tarraconensis, seventy-year-old Galba, once a favorite at Livia's court. This was hardly surprising, for wealthy Galba had just received news that Nero had ordered his execution.

On April 6, with the approval of Vindex, Galba proclaimed himself Legate of the Senate and Roman People, although his troops saluted him as princeps. The Tarraconensis garrison was limited to only one legion (VI Victrix) but Galba set about raising a second—VII Galbiana. He also received the support of Aulus Caecina Alienus, proconsular governor of the adjacent Spanish province of Baetica, Marcus Salvius Otho, quaestor of Lusitania, and Aulus Vitellius, the latter soon being dispatched by Galba to command a legion in Germania Inferior. The governor of Germania Superior, Lucius Verginius Rufus, who refused to make cause with the others, marched against Vindex with his three legions—IV Macedonica, XXI Rapax, and XII Primigenia—and overwhelmed him in battle near Vesontio (Besançon) on May 7. Despite the experience and strength of his forces, Verginius made no attempt to proclaim himself emperor, but he put his army at the senate's disposal, further weakening Nero's position.

No foreigner to Roman politics, Galba had already canvassed for support in Rome and—more importantly—mollified the praetorian guard with a promised donative. The pledge, given on his behalf by the praetorian prefect, Gaius Nymphidius Sabinus, was of vital

importance. Galba knew he had to persuade the imperial bodyguard that the removal of a sitting princeps did not mean the loss of the reason for their existence. With events unfolding in Rome as detailed in the previous chapter, the senate declared for Galba on June 8, 68. It might seem precipitate of the senate to proclaim Galba, but he was a known quantity and, on the basis of ancestry, family tradition, and service, arguably the most distinguished Roman noble still alive.

Galba was born on December 24, 3 BC in a hillside house on the Via Appia between Tarracina and Fundi some sixty-five miles south of Rome. The son of Gaius Sulpicius Galba, he was connected with the aristocratic house of Servii, which assured his acceptance among the highest levels of Roman society. As such, he owed much of his advancement through his adoption by Augustus's wife Livia. On her death, she bequeathed Galba fifty million *sesterces*, but Tiberius refused to hand it over. Galba outlived both his wife Lepida and their two sons and he remained a widower. His political career was typical of an ambitious Roman, beginning with a praetorship. Later, he served as governor of Aquitania, followed by a six-month consulship at the beginning of 33. He also served as governor in Germania Superior in 39–40, Africa (45–46) and Hispania Tarraconensis, starting in 61. He was honored with triumphal insignia and three priesthoods during his career. And Nero's desire of his death probably proved Galba's worth to the state.

The praetorians, however, were not Galba's only military problem. The legionaries—notoriously restive as soon as it seemed that Rome might be ruled by any other than a man of the Julian house—disliked Galba's senatorial nobility. This is why he prudently claimed that he was seizing power in the name of the senate and the people. He showed decisiveness, too, in swiftly acting against the governor of Africa, Clodius Macer, who had also rebelled against Nero and cut off the grain supply to Rome. Galba needed no potential rivals at his back, and the single African legion (III Augusta) was insignificant in his overall plan. On Galba's orders, Macer was assassinated; any further unrest among the isolated African troops he intended to deal with at a later date.

After Nero's death Galba began his march from Tarraconensis to the capital in company with Otho. Tacitus wrote: "the secret of empire was revealed: an emperor could be made elsewhere than at Rome." Now anyone with a provincial army to back him could aspire to the principate. By October 68, Galba was in Rome; however, his arrival

was preceded by a degree of chaos. This was occasioned by the actions of Nymphidius Sabinus, who had orchestrated a demand from the praetorians to appoint him sole praetorian prefect for life. But when it became clear that his real ambition was to take the throne, his troops backed the senate's choice and killed him. To make matters worse, Galba was met outside Rome by marines Nero had recruited to defend the city, who now demanded legionary standards and regular quarters. When they persisted, Galba's forces attacked, and many of the marines were killed.

Galba was resolute when he set his mind to solving problems, but not even his grasping years governing four provinces had prepared him for the deplorable state of the imperial *fiscus* and depleted *aerarium*. Since economies had to be made, everyone's pocket was hit: public shows were banned and promised donatives withheld—even that promised to the praetorian guard. Stories of Galba's notorious inflexibility had preceded him to Rome, and they were soon confirmed as he had men of all ranks sentenced to death without trial on the scantiest evidence that they disapproved of his administration. His popularity waned rapidly.

Galba, described by Tacitus as a “mediocre genius” and “capable of being emperor had he never ruled,” tried to redeem cash from gifts given freely by Nero to his court pets, but it was a futile task. More essentially, his attempts to persuade the people that his reign had ushered in a return to Roman virtues were exploded by an obvious partiality to his immediate supporters. While it was to be expected that Vindex' supporters would receive preferment and punishment be handed out to his opponents, provincial unrest boiled over at the unbridled greed exhibited by many of Galba's appointees. Particularly, the soldiers of Germania could not forgive him his association with Vindex, against whom they had fought. Galba's attempts to restore discipline in the army proved to be clumsy from the start. The German troops had only acquiesced to Galba's accession with poor grace when their commander Verginius Rufus had pronounced his support. And yet Galba now recalled Verginius and replaced him with the elderly Hordeonius Flaccus. In Germania Inferior the troops became mutinous when the governor, Fonteius Capito, was murdered by Galba's creature Fabius Valens, commander of Legion I Germana, and replaced by Aulus Vitellius.

At the start of 69, the soldiers of Germania Superior refused to take the annual oath to the emperor, and two days later joined the legions

of Germania Inferior in proclaiming their new commander Vitellius as emperor. Valens supported Vitellius, as did Galba's treacherous former associate Caecina, the governor of Baetica, whom Galba had sent to command Legion V Macedonica in Germania Superior.

Despite these setbacks, Galba may still have held on to power, even though his parsimony had alienated the praetorian guard and made his position insecure. But his fatal mistake was to adopt Lucius Calpurnius Piso Frugi Licinianus—an inexperienced 30-year-old, whose mother was the great-granddaughter of Sextus Pompey—as the person to support and eventually succeed him. This was the position that Otho had anticipated for himself. Having nursed resentment against Nero for stealing his wife, this added act of imperial ingratitude from Galba spurred him to action. With promises of paying the withheld donative, Otho won over the praetorians, who proclaimed him emperor on January 15, 69. They then seized Galba in the Forum Romanum and murdered him. Among other supporters, the young Piso also met his fate at the point of a sword. As Galba's head was paraded on a pole around the city, the senate hastily ratified Otho's accession.

[Augustus January 15 to April 16, AD 69]

Otho was born at Ferentium on either April 25 or 28, AD 32, into a family that traced its origins back to an Etruscan royal house. His father, Lucius Otho, was consul in 33 and a trusted administrator under the emperors Tiberius, Gaius, and Claudius. As recorded in the previous chapter, Otho's wildness as a youth brought him into Nero's circle and the two became night-time prowling companions. Plutarch relates that Otho was so extravagant he was even able to tease Nero about his meanness. Ostensibly, Otho married the greatest beauty of her time, Poppaea Sabina, but there are conflicting accounts, some suggesting that the two lovers never actually married. However, it is generally accepted that Nero's taking her off him as a mistress and his "banishment" to govern Lusitania, even though he was only a quaestor, severed their relationship and was sufficient reason for him to join the revolt against his former friend.

Otho immediately adopted the name Caesar and, unlike Galba, the troops and praetorians regarded him as the heir of the Julii and not another senatorial noble parading himself under the Julian name. It was not, however, enough for the troops of Germania, to whom he was a part of the hated Vindex-Galba axis. The combined nine legions had already declared Vitellius emperor on January 3, 69. Advance forces under Valens and Caecina were already moving south at the end of the month and Vitellius was bringing the main army behind them for the invasion of Italy. Otho may have saved his position had he moved quickly and closed the Alpine passes, but he lost time in attempting to negotiate with Vitellius. Perhaps he was reluctant to commit his much smaller forces. He could count on the four legions of Pannonia and Dalmatia, and the three legions in Moesia. But the Illyrian army would need time to reach Italy, and in the meantime he only had his own imperial retinue of about nine thousand men. Vitellius's own troops numbered some thirty thousand, while those of Caecina and Valens were between fifteen and twenty thousand each. Any other support Otho could hope for was too far away to make any difference—in Syria under Gaius Licinius Mucianus and in Judaea under Vespasian.

Eventually, on March 14, Otho moved north, deciding to hold the line along the Padus (Po) valley, to keep open communications with the Illyrian troops. He was barely in time. Caecina had crossed the

Alps into Italy, and by the second week of March sat beside the Po near Cremona, soon to be joined by Valens, who had swelled his force to some forty thousand. The two commanders were eager to bring Otho to battle and win the victory before Vitellius could arrive with the main force (now also swelling with new recruits).

Otho's strategy of making a diversionary strike with a force of the urban cohort, praetorians, and marines in Narbonensis, in order to buy time for the Illyrian legions to reach him before engaging the enemy's vanguard, was successful. An advance guard sent to hold the line on the Po also enjoyed initial success. Otho himself arrived at Bedriacum on about April 10 to meet his officers. It was agreed that the main concern was the bridge the Vitellian forces were building across the Po in order to drive southward toward the Apennines and eventually to Rome. Otho ordered the larger part of his main force to advance from Bedriacum to interrupt its completion.

While en route the Othonian forces, strung out along the Via Postumia amid baggage and supply trains, were attacked by Caecina and Valens near Cremona on April 14. The battle of Bedriacum, as it became known, resulted in the defeat of the Othonians. Otho, who was at Brixellum with a force of infantry and cavalry to impede any Vitellian units that managed to cross the Po, realized that his strategy had proven too risky. Despite his profligacy and craven reliance on the praetorians, Otho's care for the empire showed in his noble refusal to pursue his cause and continue a protracted and bloody conflict. Two weeks short of his thirty-seventh birthday, on April 16, 69 he fell on his sword at dawn, ending a three-month rule.

Vitellius

Aulus Vitellius

[Declared January 3, AD69; Augustus April 19 to December 20, AD 69]

Vitellius was born in September AD 15, the son of Lucius Vitellius, one of the more successful public figures of the Julio-Claudian period and the confidant of Claudius who persuaded the emperor into marrying Agrippina. He held three consulships and was a fellow censor with Claudius. The younger Vitellius seems to have been equally at ease in aristocratic circles, successively winning the attention of the emperors Gaius, Claudius, and Nero through flattery and political skill. Vitellius held the office of *curator operum publicorum* (public works) in Rome, and was proconsul of Africa in about 55. He was also a member of several priestly colleges, including one famous for its feasts, which it seems he enjoyed to the full. Twice married, he was involved in the death of his first son and the marriage ended in divorce; his second wife, Galeria Fundana, bore him a second son, who was killed by the Flavians after his father's overthrow.

When Galba appointed him governor of Germania Inferior late in 68, no one was probably more surprised than Vitellius, for he had almost no military skills. Perhaps wily Galba thought there would be little to fear in the way of rivalry from a man whose reputation for gluttony and gambling was notorious. If so, he was wrong. In the event, after his proclamation, Vitellius wisely relied on the superior skills of his generals Valens and Caecina, while following behind with the reserves. Caecina was already well on his way toward northern Italy when news reached him that Galba had been overthrown and Otho had taken his place as princeps. And Vitellius was still in Gaul when he heard that he had been granted the imperial powers on April 19.

Unhindered, Vitellius now proceeded to Rome at the head of his troops, Roman and mercenary, plundering Gaul and Italy in a drunken orgy, and arriving in late June–early July. He dispersed Otho's legions back to their respective provinces and disbanded the existing praetorian guard, replacing them with cohorts of his own German troops. However, he made no move against the three Moesian legions, now sitting on Italy's northeastern border. On reaching the city, there was the familiar round of revenge killings with which Vitellius hoped to secure his position, although to his credit he was generally lenient to Otho's supporters, even pardoning Otho's brother Salvius Titianus, who had played a key role in the earlier regime. Vitellius also showed

moderation in his transition to the principate.

He was too lazy to be brutal himself, but allowed Caecina and Valens to do the wet work. He assumed his powers gradually, participated in senate meetings, and put on games for the Roman mob. But no public display of either strength or modesty could mask the fact that he lacked talent. He had been one of Tiberius's young men on Capri before emerging as a flattering courtier to each of his three successors. His highest achievements lay in gluttony and extravagance, in which he was said to be unmatched; and his days were numbered. By mid-July news arrived that the legions of Egypt had proclaimed a rival emperor, the popular general and governor of Judaea, Vespasian. The plan appeared to be that Vespasian would hold Egypt while his colleague Mucianus, governor of Syria, would invade Italy. However, before this transpired, the Illyrian legions, former supporters of Otho, joined Vespasian's cause and precipitated the next stage of the civil war.

Unusually, in a time of opportunist governors, this move did not come from the top. Lucius Tampus Flavianus of Pannonia, Marcus Pompeius Silvanus of Dalmatia, and Marcus Aponius Saturninus of Moesia preferred to sit on the fence and await the outcome of events. It was their subordinates who took the decision out of their vacillating hands, notably Cornelius Fuscus, procurator of Pannonia, and Marcus Antonius Primus, commander of Galba's recently raised Legion VII Galbiana (recruiting in Pannonia). The commanders of Legion XI Claudia in Dalmatia and Legion VII Claudia in Moesia also joined in. Under the overall command of Antonius what were now legions of the Flavian party began their march on northern Italy, while Antonius took a small advance force to seize the Julian Alpine passes before the Vitellians could reach them.

[10. Link to: Competing Emperors](#)

An Ignoble End

Vitellius had the numerical upper hand—at least until Vespasian's troops arrived—and decisive action could have saved the day, but like Otho before him, he dallied, preferring as usual to leave matters to Valens and Caecina. But Valens was ill, and Caecina was planning further treachery. Although his forces were only half of what Vitellius commanded in Italy, Antonius Primus struck first before the emperor could muster additional reinforcements from Gaul or the Rhine, and raced across the Alpine passes to a bridge over the Athesis (Adige). Here they encountered some forty thousand Vitellian troops under Caecina, who was now consul, and Sextus Lucilius Bassus, prefect of the Ravenna fleet. They began secret negotiations with the Flavians, but while Bassus convinced his men to switch sides, Caecina's proved their mettle and refused. They arrested him at Hostilia near Cremona, and then joined the rest of the Vitellian forces trying to hold the line along the Padus.

With the Ravenna fleet in his pocket, Antonius was in a position to strike through the Po line, which he did when the two arriving Pannonian legions, VII Galbiana and XIII Gemina, met him at Patavium (Padua). He led the reinforcements toward Verona, where they were joined by the three legions from Moesia, III Gallicia, VII Claudia, and VII Augusta. This massing of the enemy forced the Vitellians to retreat from Hostilia toward Cremona, where two legions had been kept in reserve, and a race developed between the two sides to reach the city first. The Cremona garrison made a sortie against the onrushing Flavians in support of their retreating comrades, but were pushed back in what was called the second battle of Bedriacum. However, their spirited action enabled the troops from Hostilia to reach Cremona safely.

Having recovered from his illness, Valens had left Rome but did not make for Cremona. Instead, he returned to Gaul in search of reinforcements, but was thwarted because the remnants of the German legions were engaged in the suppression of a tribal uprising across the Rhine that agents of Antonius had fomented. Valens was captured later by Flavian forces and executed. This left the Vitellians in Cremona without any experienced leadership. Instead of remaining within the walls where they might have held on, they turned in force and, on the night of October 27, engaged the Flavians. In the ensuing battle of Cremona, the Vitellians were soundly defeated and Cremona was brutally sacked by the victors. It is thought that as many as fifty

thousand souls were slain in the four-day orgy of violence.

Vitellius had lost the north, but still held onto the peninsula with the praetorians, a newly raised legion, and the *cohortes urbanae*. It is hard to understand why Vitellius had left the urban prefect in office, for he was none other than Vespasian's older brother, Flavius Sabinus, appointed under Otho. And since he was the nominal commander of the *cohortes urbanae*, their reliability in Vitellius's cause must have been dubious. Nevertheless, in theory Vitellius had more than enough troops to block the Flavian advance across the Appenines, and he took fourteen praetorian cohorts north to Mevania before Antonius could get through. But the anticipated battle never took place because Vitellius was forced to deal with a mutiny of the fleet at Misenum. He withdrew to Narnia and split his forces, sending some troops to Misenum, leaving detachments at Narnia, and went himself to Rome. The Narnia force promptly went over to the Flavians, and the way was open for Antonius to advance on Rome. Since he did not expect further reinforcements from Mucianus, who was held up repelling a Dacian invasion of Moesia, Antonius pressed on to the very walls of the city with his five legions.

When Vitellius's officers in Rome began deserting him, he accepted that the end was near, and negotiated terms with Flavius Sabinus. On October 18, 69 he agreed to abdicate. But events transpired differently when his troops, furious at their leader's desertion, attacked Sabinus, who retreated to the Capitol with units of the *cohortes urbanae* and Vespasian's youngest son, the eighteen-year-old Domitian. A fierce battle broke out, during which the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus was destroyed. Domitian managed to escape, but Sabinus was cut down, and the Vitellians once more held Rome—for the day only. On the following morning of December 20, the Flavian army assaulted Rome and fought its way into the city. Vitellius disguised himself in dirty clothing and hid in the imperial doorkeeper's quarters, leaning a couch and a mattress against the door for protection. Dragged from his hiding place by the Flavians, he was hauled off to the Forum Romanum, where he was tortured, killed, and his body tossed into the Tiber.

On December 22, the senate recognized Vespasian, and voted him all the principate's powers and prerogatives. It was hoped that this would stop the Flavian army from sacking Rome, but neither Antonius nor Domitian—hailed as a Caesar to Vespasian's Augustus—could halt the disorder. The victorious soldiers continued the rampage until

Mucianus arrived in January 70 and took the office of regent in Vespasian's name. Rome now awaited its new Augustus, who finally arrived in October. The civil wars were at an end and a new dynasty ruled the Roman empire.

THE FLAVIAN DYNASTY

[AD 70–96]

Vespasian

Titus Flavius Vespasianus

[Declared July 1, AD 69; Augustus December 22, AD 69 to June 23, AD 79]

The Flavians were not of ancient Roman aristocracy, indeed their family history is obscure until Vespasian's father, Titus Flavius Petro, a citizen of Reate (Rieti) and a mule breeder, appears in the records as a centurion in the army of Pompey the Great, facing Caesar's at the battle of Pharsalus (August 9, 48 BC). He secured an honorable discharge and went to Asia as a tax collector—apparently a rare one according to Suetonius, since statues were raised there to him inscribed "To an Honest Tax-gatherer". Flavius became a money-lender and then appears to have retired to Raetia (appropriately for a banker, since the province later formed the greater part of Switzerland), where he died, leaving his wife and two sons, Sabinus and Vespasian. Sabinus, the elder, went on to attain under Otho the rank of urban prefect in Rome.

Vespasian was born on November 17, AD 9 in the hamlet of Falcrina, near Reate, in Sabine country. His mother, Vespasia Polla, had some aristocratic links through her brother, who entered the senate as a praetor, but otherwise the family was detached from events in Rome. Vespasian enjoyed a good education, and the financial help of his mother propelled him on the ladder of the *cursus honorum*. He was a military tribune for three or four years in Thracia; held a quaestorship in Creta-Cyrenaica; and the offices of aedile and praetor, successively, under Gaius Caligula, the latter in Germania, where he helped the emperor put down a rebellion in 39. Later he was made proconsul of Africa and then governor of Judaea.

He gained valuable experience overseas, not only in military matters but also learning the value of providing housing, sanitation, and an efficient tax-collecting system. In the process, he acquired a wife, Flavia Domitilla, who bore him two sons, Titus and Domitian, and a daughter, Domitilla. When Flavia died before his accession Vespasian returned to his former mistress, Caenis. Born a palace slave, Caenis had risen to become the Augusta Antonia's secretary and was

later given her freedom, but the law that forbade senators to marry freedwomen meant she could never become his wife. Caenis, an intelligent, clear-headed person, exerted a beneficial influence over Vespasian.

His future seemed assured when the well-placed freedman Narcissus became his patron at Claudius's court. He was indebted to Narcissus for his command of a legion in Germania, and an army in Britannia in 44, where his brilliant record made him a popular figure. The historian Suetonius said of him: "He went to Britannia, where he fought thirty battles, subjugated two tribes and took more than twenty *oppida* [hill forts], Vectis Insula [Isle of Wight] besides." This hardly does Vespasian justice. His mastery of artillery pieces such as the *scorpio* and *ballista* allowed him to annihilate supposedly impregnable fortresses in Wessex and devastate native morale. With one quarter of the invasion force, his Legion II Augusta conquered three-quarters of the Romans' target territory, including a vast swathe across the south and southwest as far as Isca Dumnoniorum (Exeter). Legion IX Hispania pushed north as far as Lindum (Lincoln), while XIV Gemina and XX Valeria Victrix advanced to Ratae (Leicester). The line connecting them was the two-hundred-mile Fosse Way, the ancient limestone ridge between Devon and Lincolnshire that became the limit of the initial Claudian occupation. During this period Vespasian served at times under the consular commander Aulus Plautius, and at times reported directly to Claudius.

Vespasian was awarded the triumphal insignia, as well as a consulship for the last two months of (probably) AD 51. However, the death of Claudius and the accession of Nero—and specifically his mother Agrippina—cast Vespasian into the wilderness for some fifteen years. Agrippina showed animosity to any friend of Narcissus, even after the freedman had killed himself. Vespasian continued to serve on the periphery of the empire until Nero made him proconsul of Africa in about 63–64. On completion of his term, Vespasian returned to Rome where he seems to have gained the emperor's trust sufficiently to be included on Nero's tour of Achaea in 66–67. He was, therefore, the man on hand when a revolt broke out in Judaea, and Nero called on him to deal with the problem.

By spring of 67, with sixty thousand legionaries, auxiliaries, and allies under his command, Vespasian in the company of Titus, the eldest of his two sons, set out to subdue Galilee and then to cut off Jerusalem. Success was quick and decisive. By October all of Galilee

had been pacified and plans for the strategic circumvallation of Jerusalem were soon formed. It was in Judaea, he was to recall, that he came close to death for the second time, when he was narrowly rescued after being cornered by Jewish resistance fighters; the first time had been in Athens, when he fell asleep during one of Nero's interminable musical recitals. And it was from Judaea that Vespasian surveyed the fast-moving events of 68 and 69 in Italy.

He gave his short-lived approval to Galba as an alternative to Nero, but the new emperor was dead before Vespasian's goodwill message reached Rome. On hearing of the further deterioration of the situation, Vespasian determined to act. The idea of aspiring to the principate was not a new one. There had been omens in his childhood that predicted a great future. A popular story told of how, during his aedileship, Caligula—furious at Vespasian's failure to keep the streets of Rome clean—ordered soldiers to load the aedile down with mud. This was interpreted to mean that one day the soil of Italy would be trampled on in a civil war, but that Vespasian would protect it. Oddly, the duty of maintaining Rome's streets fell to the lowliest rank of the *cursus honorum*, the *vingtivirate* (one of twenty), not an aedile. Perhaps Suetonius, who tells this tale, confused the order of events in Vespasian's career, or he was making a point of Caligula's cruelty in forcing the senior aedile to do a junior's job.

However, it was luck that precipitated Vespasian's decision to do something. The two thousand men of the three legions in Moesia, one of them attached from Syria, had reached Aquileia in support of Otho, and remained there, despite news of his suicide. Seeing that other armies had declared their own emperors, these men decided to elect their own, and settled on Vespasian on the recommendation of the Syrian contingent, who best knew Vespasian's record. When the news leaked out, the prefect of Egypt made his legions take the oath to Vespasian on July 1, 69, and the emperor-elect's own troops in Judaea were only too eager to follow suit days later. Swallowing his jealousy of Vespasian, Lucius Mucianus, governor of Syria, gave his support, and with a promise of forty thousand archers from Vologeses, king of the Parthians, Vespasian was ready to begin his campaign.

In this, as in everything he did, he showed the shrewdness of a Julius Caesar. Instead of marching directly on Rome, he directed Mucianus to take his two remaining Syrian legions west to support those of the Illyrian provinces that had proclaimed him. (Vespasian was not to know at this point that Marcus Antonius Primus was

already advancing into northern Italy in his name). Vespasian then went to Alexandria to secure the grain supply and deny it to Vitellius. The threat of starvation in Rome did much to weaken Vitellius's standing in the eyes of the populace. Vespasian's delay also anticipated the fall of Jerusalem, which he needed since Jerusalem was wealthy and he knew that the *fiscus* would be empty. However, the events in Rome of December 70 meant that he could no longer tarry in the east, so he left the investment of Jerusalem in the capable hands of his son Titus and left shortly before Jewish resistance finally crumbled. Pockets of Vitellian resistance held him up briefly, but the hindrance proved fortuitous in that on reaching Rome news of Jerusalem's fall had arrived, so the senate was able to decree their new Augustus a suitable triumph to greet him.

Vespasian in Office

At the age of sixty-one, Vespasian was now at the helm of an empire shattered by a year of anarchy. There had been an enormous loss of public confidence in the power of the Roman State, which the new princeps needed to heal. In this he enjoyed a natural advantage: a rustic, common-sense upbringing combined with a sterling military career. He brought to Rome the native shrewdness of an Italian farmer, rather than the intellectual brilliance of the city-dweller. He notoriously loathed any form of affectation—all too prevalent among the new nobility arising from the depredations of Nero. When a young man, reeking of perfume, approached him to give thanks for a promotion in rank, Vespasian turned away in disgust and canceled the order, adding: “I should not have minded so much if it had been garlic.”

Despite public acclamation, Vespasian faced immediate threats to his reign, among them the rebellion on the Rhine of a Batavian auxiliary commander, Julius Civilis. This was swiftly suppressed, but it underlined the need for military reform. Like Augustus before him, Vespasian was well aware that an idle army is a dangerous one. Neither was the mistake Nero had made of remaining aloof from his troops lost on Vespasian, who assiduously cultivated the legions and so won their loyalty. In doing so, he and his sons finally weaned the provincial soldiers off their adherence to the Julii and gained from them the acceptance of the practice of succession in the principate. It was clear to Vespasian that the revolt of Civilis had succeeded due to the widespread support he found among the troops quartered in Gaul and along the Rhine. Although called “Roman,” most were natives of their region and commanded by native officers. Vespasian took measures to ensure such a situation could not arise again. In future the auxiliaries were to serve in regions far away from the countries of their origin to avoid nationalistic sympathies coloring their loyalty to the state, nor were they allowed any longer to serve under native officers.

The emperor also wisely followed the Augustan principle of keeping the army busy. The failure of Augustus’s major campaign of conquest, that of the extension of Gaul north to the line of the Albis (Elbe), meant that the Roman frontier followed the Rhine south until it could cross to the upper Danube. This formed a great indent in the line and greatly extended the length to be defended. In 73 Vespasian ordered the legate of Germania Superior, Gnaeus Cornelius Clemens,

to annex the triangular-shaped region between the rivers' headwaters known as the Agri Decumates, and this straightened out the frontier. While this proceeded without much hindrance from the tribes of the sparsely populated region—the modern Black Forest—it went slowly, since Clemens erected forts along his front lines as his troops pressed forward. But by 79 a line existed that at least stretched between Argentorate (Strasbourg) to Arae Flaviae (Rottweil), and from there to the edge of Lacus Venetus (Lake Constance); and Clemens may even have reached as far north as a line running from Aquae (Baden) to Guntia (Günzburg) on the Danube.

Vespasian also recognized another lesson in the revolts of Civilis and Vindex. The provinces, especially those of Gaul, had attained such a level of Romanized development that they wanted to play an active part in the cultural, political, and military life of the empire. Apart from Claudius opening up the senatorial order to Gallic nobles, little else had been done in this direction, and Vespasian feared that, denied participation, provincial energies would be diverted first toward nationalism and then separatism. In 73 he assumed the office of censor and used the position to fill the gaps in the senate with a new aristocracy drawn from the Italian *municipia* (towns with an imperial charter). He then conferred Latin rights on Baetica and continued the programs of Julius Caesar and Augustus in founding colonies and granting municipal charters to provincial towns. Between 74–84 no fewer than three hundred and fifty Spanish towns received their *municipium*. Elsewhere in the empire numerous colonies were also founded. Once made a Latin *municipium*, the local elite automatically acquired Roman citizenship and became eligible for high positions within the government.

In this, he was quite open that, like Augustus, he intended to have a senate amenable to his actions—they should obey rather than just be co-operative. However, even those naturally opposed to him did not want to see a return to the spendthrift years of Caligula or Nero; Vespasian was famous for his parsimony. He made it the business of his reign to restore the moral foundation of the state and its economic stability before turning to artistic embellishment.

Among Vespasian's many achievements, a few stand out. In Rome, he expanded the city's *pomerium* to beyond the Servian Wall to help relieve crowding—an overt symbol of Rome's invulnerability to foreign attack that would remain until the later Aurelian Wall was built in less steady times. He encouraged rebuilding on vacated lots,

restored the Capitol and the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus destroyed in 69. Work began on three massive new monuments. On the Caelian Hill a temple was raised in honor of the deified Claudius, a project cannily designed to identify Vespasian as the legitimate heir to the Julio-Claudians, while distancing himself from Nero. The tall platform for this huge edifice had been begun during the reign of Nero, but he appropriated it to become a raised garden for his Domus Aurea before the actual temple had been raised. As a celebration of the tranquility Vespasian had brought to the empire the Templum Pacis (Temple of Peace) was built beside the Forum Romanum. On the Palatine, Vespasian pulled down Nero's palace and began construction of the extensive Domus Flavia that his younger son Domitian would complete. But above all, he began to build a massive amphitheater on the site of the lake of Nero's Domus Aurea, known as the Amphitheatrum Flavium. We know it better today as the Colosseum.

Restoring the *fiscus* to solvency after Nero and a year of civil strife was a monumental task, but by the end of his ten-year reign it was accomplished. This, of course, required numerous changes to taxation and many new ways of raising money, many of them, naturally, unpopular. Cities that had been freed from paying tax in the past—Rhodes, Byzantium, and Samos—now had to pay again. Achaëa, freed by Nero, was returned to provincial status and had to pay, as did Trachian (coastal) Cilicia and Comagene. No part of daily life escaped Vespasian's taxes, including the most basic production of human urine. This might seem odd, but it was collected for use by fullers in cleaning woolens. When Titus—more fastidious than his gruff father—complained that taxing the contents of the public latrines was unsavory, Vespasian held out a coin taxed on the first day and asked him to sniff it. When Titus complied and smelled nothing but its metallic odor, his father laughed and said that was strange, because it had come directly from a urinal.

The position of the principate in respect of the senate was quite clear. Vespasian held the office of consul in every year of his reign except 73 and 78, and made Titus his colleague on six occasions. In 71, Titus was given the *imperium proconsulare* and the *tribunicia potestas*, which firmly identified him as Vespasian's successor. However, to prevent repetition of praetorian meddling in the succession, he appointed Titus as sole praetorian prefect (having reduced the guard from the sixteen cohorts of Vitellius to the Augustan number of nine). Nevertheless, Vespasian was courteous in

his dealings with the senate—although it was clear to all who actually ruled the empire—and generous-spirited toward all men. As Suetonius says, his researches showed that Vespasian had no innocent party executed, and he went so far as to endower the daughter of his former enemy Vitellius for her marriage.

Unlike the majority of his predecessors, Vespasian died unmolested in his bed on June 23, 79, after contracting a brief illness; perhaps fortunate that his two ambitious sons Titus and Domitian were prepared to let nature take its course. At the age of seventy-eight, his life finished on an ironic note when Vespasian, who never mustered much faith in Roman religion or superstition, uttered, “Woe is me, I think I am turning into a god.”

Of the three Flavian emperors, Vespasian was undoubtedly the greatest. Usually waspish Suetonius, writing in *The Life of Vespasian*, described his rule like this: “The empire which for a long time had been unsettled and, as it were, drifting through the usurpation and violent death of three emperors, was at last taken in hand and given stability. This house was, it is true, obscure and without family portraits, yet it was one of which our country had no reason whatever to be ashamed....”

Titus

Titus Flavius Vespasianus

[Augustus June 23, AD 79 to September 13 AD 81]

Such was the care with which Vespasian had prepared for the succession, there was no question about the immediate elevation of Titus, who was in his fortieth year. There was, however, a great deal of unease. Titus had earned a reputation for extravagance and ruthlessness in his youth, and a savage brutality in dealing with the Jews, and the senate—never well disposed toward the humbly-born Flavians—feared he might be another Nero. It turned out differently.

Titus was born on December 30, AD 39 in what was described as a small, dingy, slum bedroom in a Rome tenement block. But Vespasian's political ascent under Claudius meant that young Titus became a close companion to the emperor's son Britannicus, and the two studied together in the palace. Suetonius tells a story of how Narcissus called in a physiognomist to examine Britannicus's features and predict his future. The seer was emphatic that Britannicus would never become princeps, but that Titus would. The two boys remained close friends until Britannicus's cruel death in 55. In later years Titus erected statues of his dead friend in several locations and in the Domus Flavia.

At some point after 61, he served as a military tribune in Germania Superior and Britannia before returning to Rome early in 64 to study law. His political career at this time is obscure, but on his return he married Arrecina Tertulla. We know little about her, and in any event, she died soon after. Titus then wed the daughter of a noble family, Marcia Furnilla, but later divorced her when the family fell foul of Nero. There may have been a daughter called Julia, who was said to have died in her mid-twenties of an abortion forced on her by Titus's brother and successor, Domitian.

In 66 Nero appointed Titus as *legatus legionis* to XV Apollinaris to accompany Vespasian in settling the revolt in Judaea, even though he had not yet been a praetor, the judicial post normally held by a senator before becoming a legionary commander.

It is worth noting that the author of the history of the campaign, Josephus, had a strong Flavian bias, so his glowing account of Titus's contribution in the Jewish Wars may be suspect. Joseph ben Mattathias (c.37–100), known to history as Josephus, was a close confidant of Vespasian. He had been the commander of a small Jewish

force holding the small citadel of Jotapata in Galilee against Vespasian when it capitulated. At first Vespasian's prisoner, he became a valuable source of information on the Jews. More importantly, canny Josephus brought Vespasian's attention to an ancient eastern prophecy which foretold that the rulers of the world would arise from Judaea. Interpreting this to Vespasian's benefit, he was rewarded by being adopted as the emperor's son on Vespasian's accession.

Josephus wrote a history of the war that served to flatter his patron and warn others against the folly of opposing Rome. Despite its partisan tone, the book's vivid prose earned Josephus a wide reputation as an historian. In one passage, he described the desperation of the Jews:

Need drove the starving to gnaw at anything. Refuse which even animals would reject was collected and turned into food. In the end they were eating belts and shoes and the leather stripped off their shields.

Titus figured prominently in the subjugation of at least five rebel towns, but appears to have never completely taken any strongly defended citadels, until Jerusalem.

When Vespasian left for Alexandria in 69 and subsequently Rome, Titus was left in charge of reducing Jerusalem, the military exploit for which he is most remembered. It was a lengthy and bitter business in which typical Roman discipline and sheer doggedness won the day. The city's fortifications were formidable. With four legions under his command, Titus began the assault in the spring of 70. In less than four weeks, the suburban walls were breached, leaving only the inner city and the Temple of Solomon in Jewish hands. The Romans built a siege wall around the citadel, and the circumvallation had the desired effect of inducing a famine within. By August, the outer Temple court had been breached and, in the ensuing attack, the Temple was burned to the ground and all the captives were butchered. Titus was hailed as *imperator* by his troops.

In this and the events that followed, Titus earned his reputation for cruelty. He went on a tour of the eastern provinces, parading his Judaeans captives in public and throwing Jews to wild beasts in the arenas or forcing them to fight each other to the death. However, it should be remembered that in this he was only following Roman precedent, and—more importantly—demonstrating the price of rebelling against his father in a manner that was traditionally understood by the oriental population of the region.

During this tour he fell in love with the Jewess Berenice, sister of

Herod Agrippa II, and took her back to Rome with him in 71. The relationship between the heir-apparent and the formidable oriental princess spiked Roman prejudices and she was painted as another Cleopatra. It was with great reluctance that Titus eventually put her aside in 75. On his return to Rome he celebrated a lavish double-triumph with Vespasian (who would not waste the money on two separate events) for the fall of Jerusalem. A triumphal arch (now lost) was built into the eastern end of the Circus Maximus to mark the occasion. Shortly after, construction of a second arch was begun at the entrance to the Forum Romanum. On the inside of the arch, the triumphant troops are seen carrying off the spoils of the Temple, including the sacred seven-armed candlestick, the Menorah.

Clouded by calamity

Titus demonstrated his administrative skills as his father's partner, politely attending senate meetings and asking advice of his elders. On the other hand Suetonius tells us that he was an adept forger who created evidence to win convictions, and was somewhat tyrannical in trying arraigned men in a theater rather than a law court in the hope of winning a conviction by popular pressure rather than by reasoning. Titus was doing the regime's necessary dirty work, while leaving Vespasian on high moral ground. Set against this impression, Suetonius tells us that Titus was naturally kind-hearted.

Titus proceeded to disperse fears about the nature of his reign and increase his popularity the moment he became princeps. The better qualities noted by Suetonius came to the fore in an unbroken succession of lavish public spectacles, the giving of gifts, and gestures of open-handedness to any who petitioned him. Vast amounts of capital were poured into extensive building schemes in Rome, including the continuation of the Domus Flavia on the Palatine and the Colosseum begun by Vespasian and, close by, the building of Rome's largest and most luxurious baths yet. He also started construction of his triumphal arch astride the Via Sacra where it tops the hill before descending into the Forum Romanum, widely admired today as the most perfect of all Roman monumental arches. Titus celebrated games in the Colosseum that lasted for a hundred days, during which it was said he presented gladiators, wild beast hunts, infantry battles, and flooded the arena to stage sea fights. The latter has taxed historians and engineers and would appear to be a silly exaggeration, because the wooden floored construction above three stories of underworks would have made flooding the arena impossible. On the other hand, there are still some modern historians who claim it could have been done, although no one to date has convincingly demonstrated how.

Titus's joyous reign was marred by two calamities. In 79, Vesuvius sensationally erupted, smothering the towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum on the wealthy Roman holiday coast of the Bay of Naples. Pliny the Younger experienced the terror and wrote: "You could hear the shrieks of women, the wailing of infants, and the shouting of men.... Many besought the aid of the gods, but still more imagined there were no gods left, and that the universe was plunged into eternal darkness for evermore."

One of the victims was his uncle, the prolific writer Pliny the Elder,

the man who had so loathed Claudius's wife Agrippina. While Titus was visiting the disaster zone, a huge fire broke out in Rome, destroying the new Capitol, Agrippa's Pantheon and Baths, and a sizeable residential area. Titus responded by pouring money and resources into the stricken regions, even selling some of his own furniture to raise relief funds.

His death at Reate after reigning for only two years, two months and twenty days followed a short illness. Malaria was the probable cause, but because there was little love between Titus and his younger brother, suspicion also fell on Domitian. Titus, who had made no provision for the succession and did not have a son, was heard to say that Domitian was his appointed successor, but he never conferred the *imperium proconsulare* or *tribunicia potestas* on his brother. Fortunately for the empire, no one wanted a return to the horrors of 68–69, and when the praetorians immediately proclaimed Domitian emperor, the senate was hardly likely to demur. Gaius Caligula began a brightly starred reign and turned sour when the funds ran out; would Titus have been similar had he lived longer? Like James Dean in Hollywood history, bright, handsome Titus died before his star could fade, so that after his unexpectedly short reign he came to be regarded as Rome's most beloved emperor.

Domitian

Titus Flavius Domitianus

[Augustus September 13, AD 81 to September 18, AD 96]

There was little doubt that Vespasian's remaining son would become princeps automatically, even though he had not been designated. In fact, in contrast to Titus, the thirty-year-old Domitian had no administrative experience to speak of. Neither his father nor his brother had seen fit to promote him to any offices, apart from some minor consulships, one as Vespasian's colleague. He had been styled *princeps iuventutis* and Caesar, but these were empty titles without sensible duties to go with them. However, Domitian's reign turned out to be a successful one by any standards. And yet the ancient histories vilified him as a nasty, despotic tyrant.

Suetonius claimed that one of his favorite pastimes was catching flies and then stabbing them with a needle-sharp stylus, and that he regularly scorched his prisoners' testicles to make them reveal information. While there undoubtedly was a streak of Flavian cruelty in Domitian, as will become clear, the excesses attributed to him are largely the inventions of writers who shared the senatorial outlook of the Flavians as jumped-up rustics. More to the point, Domitian was succeeded by a new dynasty, and —inevitably—the new regime was anxious to portray itself in a good light by exaggerating the follies and wickedness of the previous. The senate, of whom Domitian remained openly contemptuous throughout his reign, eager to smear his name in any case, was officially encouraged to do so after his death. However, given his character, he was touchy about any perceived affront to his dignity. While early in his reign he was content to be addressed as *dominus et deus* (Lord and God), he did nothing to have the title conferred on him officially. But toward the end Domitian's desire for deification during his lifetime was clearly apparent, and a refusal to worship him was taken as a sign of atheism, a sin that ended the careers and even lives of many.

Domitian was born in Rome on October 24, 51. Unlike Titus, Domitian was not educated in the palace, yet he received sound training in Rome in the same way as any member of the senatorial elite of his day. Domitian gave public recitals of his works, conversed elegantly, and was remembered for sound arguments in debate. With his mother Domitilla dead in his infant years, his brother the elder by ten years and not keen on a child tagging along after him, and a father constantly away in the provinces, Domitian's adolescence was marked

by isolation. This seems to have bred within him a preference for seclusion similar to Tiberius; a need for self-reliance combined with tactlessness and an easily injured dignity characterized his autocratic reign. Tellingly, the writings of Tiberius were his favorite reading.

Domitian's movements during the upheavals of 68–70 are not known, other than that he was in Rome, in contact with his elderly uncle Flavius Sabinus. Suetonius tells us that he fled with Sabinus to the Capitol in the last tumultuous days, and when the Vitellians attacked, hid in the caretaker's quarters. In the morning he escaped, disguised as a follower of Isis, crossed the river to Trans Tiberim (Trastevere), and was hidden by the mother of a fellow-student from the agents sent to track him down. Emerging after the victory of the Flavian forces, Domitian was hailed as Caesar. In late 70 he married Domitia Longina, daughter of the legendary general, Gnaeus Domitius Corbulo, whom Tigellinus had forced to commit suicide in 66. Corbulo's name was synonymous with the military achievement Domitian craved. Better still, the marriage brought with it the general's substantial base of clients, which improved Domitian's *auctoritas*. However, the marriage was troubled. An only child died young, and Domitia was exiled by her husband c.83. Later, he recalled her to the palace, where she lived with him in some tumult until his death.

From the outset of his reign, Domitian made it clear that he wanted servants and not partners in government. He held the consulship for the first eight years and a total of seventeen times in all, and only gave it up because he came to scorn such a lowly senatorial rank. In 85 he made himself *censor perpetuus* instead of holding the office annually, as Vespasian had done. In this it was evident that he intended to control the make-up of the senate and dominate it. After first attending senate meetings he soon stopped, ignoring the body altogether and taking decisions in the style of an old dictator. Instead, he relied more on the aid of *equites* and gave the order increased importance, and by placing knights in positions previously reserved for senators, he further earned the odium of the aristocracy. Only in one respect was an equestrian rank diminished—Domitian returned to the older practice of appointing two praetorian prefects, but he ensured they were not persons of influence or power, and he also changed them frequently to lessen the potential threat a prolonged term proffered.

Domitian's ambitious and spectacular building program was

unmatched by any other emperor since Augustus. After the great fire of 64, the civil wars of 68–69, and the devastating fire of 80, Rome was badly in need of repair. He began to erect, repair, or complete some fifty structures, including the restored Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitol. He finished the Colosseum Vespasian had begun and Titus dedicated. He built structures in the Campus Martius for his *Ludi Capitolini* (Capitoline Games), an odeum, stadium, and a new circus (still visible today as the Piazza Navona). On the Forum face of the Capitol he built a temple to his deified father and brother, and completed the Arch of Titus that celebrated the capture of Jerusalem. He raised a new shopping center in the Saepta, and built granaries and water works. His most spectacular edifice was the vast palace on the Palatine, larger by far, in substance if not extent, than the Domus Aureus. Adjacent to the Domus Flavia, the Augustana was a continuation that fully covered Nero's Domus Aurea extension on the Palatine as well as a considerable part of the Palace of Tiberius, and stretched from the ramparts above the Forum Romanum to the Circus Maximus, towering like a cliff above it.

Domitian's admiration for older Italian virtues was more pronounced than his father's. But more superstitious than Vespasian, he had brooded much on the subject of religion during his secluded adolescent years. Whereas Vespasian had evinced a return to simpler values by setting an example, Domitian legislated for morality. He curbed the licentiousness of stage performances, suppressed prostitution, and revived the punishment of starvation to death for unchaste Vestal Virgins. Domitian closely identified himself with the ancient Roman gods Minerva and Jupiter, publicly linking the latter divinity to his regime through the *Ludi Capitolini* founded in 86. These were held every four years in the early summer, and consisted of chariot races, athletics, gymnastics, music, oratory, and poetry. Contestants came from many nations, and no expense was spared; the emperor himself awarded the prizes.

The huge building program, the *Ludi Capitolini* and many other lavish arena games, and the expense of several costly wars had a predictable effect on the economy. Free-giving Titus had not left the *fiscus* in a particularly healthy state. However, Domitian left his successor a satisfactory public financial situation through a variety of means that did much to blacken his memory. The first was a good move. Shortly after taking office, Domitian restored the weight of the silver *denarius* by about twelve per cent (to the earlier level of

Augustus). Unfortunately, he was forced to debase it again in 85, when the imperial income proved insufficient to meet military and public expenditure. The rigorous collection of taxes soon became necessary, sparking a short-lived rebellion in Africa and rumblings elsewhere. Inevitably, confiscation and murder returned to the menu of money-raising methods, along with the reappearance of the hated *delatores*. He altered the law pertaining to *relegatio* (a lighter form of banishment) to include the forfeiture of property as part of the sentence...and welcome extra income.

[11. Link to: Events Under the Flavians \(Family Tree\)](#)

Domitian's Wars

While the military abilities of Vespasian and Titus were genuine, those of Domitian were not. And yet during his reign there were more wars and military campaigns against the empire's enemies than at any time since the late Republican period. This was clearly due to necessity—German and Dacian tribes were beginning to put pressure on the frontiers along the Rhine and the vast length of the Danube—but it may reflect Domitian's desire to emulate his father and brother's military victories. And, like his father, he courted the soldiers, giving each legionary a big pay rise of one-third, and taking a personal hand in as many campaigns as he could manage.

He claimed a triumph in 83 for subduing the Chatti, a warlike German tribe of the Taunus mountains that threatened Germania Superior in the region of Moguntiacum (Mainz). Even modern historians disagree on the outcome, many preferring the view of Tacitus that the conquest was illusory, even a joke.

Tacitus is largely responsible for the damning of Domitian's military reputation, but there is a clear reason for the contemporary historian's grumpiness toward the emperor. Domitian's need for British troops in Pannonia and Moesia helped to curtail the operations of the historian's admired father-in-law, the British governor Gnaeus Julius Agricola. His predecessor, Julius Frontinus (74–76), had made some progress on the edges of Wales, but Agricola (76–84) cherished a far larger ambition. He wanted to conquer all of the British Isles, including Hibernia (Ireland). First, he completed the subjugation of Wales, then moved north, establishing a line of forts between the Itun Aestuarii (Solway Firth) and Tinea (Tyne). Next he advanced into Scotland and built a second fortified line between the Clota (Clyde) and Bodotria (Forth). From here he pressed on northeast in 84, aiming to bring the last Celtic army in Britannia to battle. In this he was successful, meeting the Pictish force at Mons Graupius (probably the mountain of Bennachie, near Inverurie). For the Romans it was an overwhelming victory, but the advantage was never pressed home, because shortly after it Domitian wanted the reinforcements and recalled Agricola.

Historians who disagree with Tacitus's judgment on Domitian's campaign point to the archaeological evidence of the fortifications erected along a hundred and twenty-mile line stretching from north of the Taunus around the western Moenus (Main) valley. This then incorporated the Nicer (Neckar) valley and joined Vespasian's

northernmost line of the Agri Decumates. At Moguntiacum Domitian gathered detachments from nine legions: the four taken off Agricola from Britannia, the four in Germania Superior, and XXI Rapax from Germania Inferior. Under the command of Gaius Velius Rufus, the Chatti were ruthlessly driven out of the Moenus valley and away from the Rhine to disappear in the wild German forests.

Domitian was also responsible for strengthening the north bank of the Danube, from his new German line, east to Abusina (Eining). The peace these new defenses brought to the enlarged Germania Superior was to last until the third century. Civil administration was also given to the province as distinct from a mere legate of the army. The first of these new governors was the well-known jurist Lucius Javolenus Priscus, appointed in 90. A further benefit soon became apparent, when Domitian was able to transfer two of its legions (I Adiutrix and XXI Rapax) to the lower Danube, where a far greater danger threatened.

The British detachments, who had expected to be returned home, were also sent; but it was not enough. The empire simply did not have enough experienced forces to deal with the encroaching threat on the lower Danube and, in 86, an entire legion (II Adiutrix) was moved from Britannia to Moesia to help counter what is known as the First Dacian War. In 85 Dacian tribes living north of the Danube crossed the river and invaded Moesia. They advanced to the south and slew the legate of the province, Oppius Sabinus. Domitian hurried to Moesia, and the initial success against the aggressors by his praetorian prefect, Cornelius Fuscus, allowed the emperor to celebrate a triumph at Rome in 86... just before disaster struck.

Intending to counter-invade Dacia, Fuscus took one legion across the Danube, but was pushed back and finally caught just across the river. Since Legion V Alaudae disappears from the records at this point, it was presumably this legion that was wiped out with Fuscus. Domitian spent 87 planning a recovery campaign, and returned to Moesia in 88 with the army's new legate, Tettius Julianus. In the Second Dacian War, although Julianus secured a victory at the Pass of Tapae (the Iron Gate, near modern Bucova), the business was far from settled when, in the same year, the legate of the two legions stationed at Moguntiacum, Lucius Antonius Saturninus, raised his standard. The reasons for Saturninus's revolt are not clear, but perhaps he coveted the purple for himself and felt the time was ripe. In any event, Domitian's courting of his troops paid off. By the time he arrived in

January 89, the other six legions in Germania had declared their loyalty and Saturninus had already been killed in a skirmish. This rebellion shook Domitian badly and it was at the root of the terror that he unleashed soon after.

Later that same year, Domitian attacked the Jazyges, Suebian Marcomanni, and Quadi in the First Pannonian War. Domitian negotiated a settlement with the Dacian king Decebalus to avoid having to fight on two fronts. Compelled to return to the Danube three years later, Domitian fought the combined forces of the Suebi and the Sarmatae in the Second Pannonian War. Few details of this conflict exist, other than it lasted for eight months and in its course Legion XXI Rapax was lost.

Back in Rome, Domitian's last years were a period of tyranny and cruelty. The *delatores*, already at work helping to fill the *fiscus*, were kept busy uncovering supposed plots. Having been assiduous in the proper dispensation of justice in the early years of his reign, Domitian insisted on the formality of a trial for the victims, but it did not save them. The writers Pliny the Younger, Juvenal, Suetonius, and Tacitus all write of the prevailing atmosphere of terror. Christian writers later referred to Domitian as the "second great persecutor" (the first being Nero). Given his devotion to Roman pagan religion, it is easy to see how such stories could have evolved, but hard evidence of his antipathy—other than considering Christians atheists from the Roman point of view—is lacking. Christians may have been among those banished or executed during the Terror, but no organized persecution is evident. Whereas there is clear evidence that the Jews were made to feel uneasy under Domitian, who scrupulously collected the Jewish tax and harassed Jewish tax dodgers during much of his reign.

Any charge, no matter how slight—failing to toast the emperor's health, for instance—resulted in confiscation of the man's estate and secured his execution. The Roman mob, not much affected, was treated to lavish shows in the arenas and circuses, but the senatorial order suffered heavily. The sensible ones, including the ex-British governors Frontinus and Agricola, retired from any form of public life and hid away on their country estates.

When Domitian executed his harmless cousin Flavius Clemens in 95 on a charge of atheism (possibly a conversion to Christianity, more likely a failure to salute the emperor speedily), and exiled Clemens' wife Domitilla, the emperor's own niece, no one felt safe from his paranoia. A palace plot to assassinate Domitian was formulated

between his wife Domitia, his chamberlain Parthenius, and the praetorian prefect Petronius Secundus. It was simple enough. Domitian was persuaded to give an interview to Domitilla's disgruntled steward, who came before his emperor nursing an injured arm on September 18, 96. Concealed in the bandages was a knife with which he fatally stabbed Domitian, who was just a month short of his forty-fifth birthday.

Domitian had no son to follow him, but he had not entirely ignored the question of his successor, having named the sons of his cousin Clemens. However, after having their father executed, they were dropped, and if he had other arrangements in mind, the assassin put an end to them. The conspirators, however, were prepared. They had secured a candidate for the principate, the old and respected senator Marcus Cocceius Nerva.

THE NERVO-TRAJANIC DYNASTY

[AD 96–138]

Nerva

Marcus Cocceius Nerva

[Augustus September 18, AD 96 to January 27, AD 98]

When Nerva uncovered the Piso conspiracy against Nero in 65, the grateful emperor rewarded his praetor-designate with triumphal insignia and placed his statue prominently in the palace. Nerva was on the early stages of the *cursus honorum* at the time, as would be expected of a young aristocrat.

Born on November 8, 30, Nerva could claim eminent ancestry. Before his first consulship, on his father's side there had been no less than five consuls starting with his great-grandfather, also Marcus Cocceius Nerva, in 36 BC; his grandfather, a distinguished jurist of the same name, accompanied Tiberius on his retirement to Capri in AD 26. On his mother's side an aunt, Rubellia Bassa, was the great-granddaughter of Tiberius. In addition, his great-uncle Lucius Cocceius Nerva played a part in the negotiations that secured a treaty between Octavian and Antony at Brundisium in 40 BC. We know almost nothing about his early life before the Piso conspiracy, although the fact that his name does not appear on any legionary rolls suggests that he did not pursue the traditional aristocratic path of military tribune; neither was he a public speaker nor legal advocate.

Following Nero's fall in 68, Nerva disappears from the histories again, but it is clear that he found favor with Vespasian because he shared the consulship with the emperor in 71, the only time that Vespasian ever held the office without his son Titus. He was also a consul with Domitian in 90—Nerva, clearly an adept at foiling conspiracies, had alerted the emperor to the revolt of Antonius Saturninus in 89. This may not have saved him from imperial paranoia in the final years of Domitian's reign, and whether or not he was forced to withdraw from public life remains an open question.

On the face of it, Nerva seems an odd candidate for the principate. At sixty-six he was really too old for the job; his long-time support of the Flavians, with close ties to the unpopular Domitian, should have disqualified him in senatorial eyes; his distant relationship to the Julio-Claudians on his mother's side should have doubly damned him

with the aristocracy. On the other hand, Nerva was a capable senator who had already demonstrated prudence and tact, and was probably the best available person to become princeps. Despite his pro-Flavian stance of the past, for the senatorial order rejected by Domitian in preference to lowly *equites* Nerva's accession was a triumph; and he was quick to take an oath not to execute any senator. But what pleased the senate did not necessarily appeal to the soldiers. Having been weaned from the Julian house, the troops liked the warrior Flavians and resented Domitian's murder. There were rumblings the length of the frontier, but the legions acquiesced with bad grace to Nerva's accession, and in Rome the praetorians had no candidate to fuel their opposition. Their restraint, however, was short-lived.

It was politically expedient for Nerva to distance himself from Domitian, certainly in the eyes of the senatorial order—the Roman public was indifferent so long as the grain dole worked and there were plenty of gladiatorial diversions. But it was also useful to channel any popular resentment in the direction of the previous regime and away from the principate. An officially encouraged denigration of Domitian began almost immediately, although Nerva wisely retained much of his predecessor's legislation simply because it worked. In a shrewd move he threw Domitian's Domus Augustana open to the public as a civic building, the Domus Populi, and lived in a modest house in the Horti Sallustiani, the garden district that Vespasian had preferred. Exiles were allowed to return, and property confiscated by Domitian was restored.

Nerva appointed men whom he knew and trusted to essential offices, men such as Sextus Julius Frontinus, who came out of retirement to become *cura aquarum*, an office that had long been subject to mismanagement. Frontinus put an end to the many common abuses endemic in the delivery of water and published a work on Rome's water supply, *De Aquis Urbis Romae*. Despite the official line on Domitian, many of Nerva's *amici*, his closest advisors, were men with Flavian ties, who, by virtue of their links to the previous regime, were valuable to Nerva for what they knew. Unfortunately, some of this inner circle were *delatores* like the infamous A. Didius Gallus Fabricius Veiento, one of Domitian's ill-reputed counselors, who was to be found seated next to Nerva at imperial dinners. Nerva was also less willing to consult the senate than many senators would have liked, generally preferring the opinions of his *consilium*. In general, however, Nerva managed to win over the senate without giving it any

real power, retaining that for the principate, but he re-established the tradition of senatorial co-operation with the princeps, which would endure throughout most of the next century.

In a reign of only sixteen months, it is not surprising that Nerva undertook little public building. His name appears on numerous mileposts along provincial roads, but the program was really Domitian's. He also appropriated Domitian's uncompleted forum that joined that of Augustus to the Templum Pax and dedicated it in 98, which is why we now know it as the Forum of Nerva. In addition, he built granaries and made repairs to the Colosseum after the Tiber broke its banks and flooded the low-lying district. For the benefit of the public, Nerva restored the more liberal theater performances that Domitian had suppressed.

Nerva's greatest monument, however, was not a building but the institution of the *alimenta*. Under this scheme small farmers pledged their land as security and were allowed to borrow up to a twelfth of its value from the *fiscus*. The five per cent interest on the loan was repaid not to the *fiscus* but to their *municipium*, which used the money to support the children of poor parents. The *alimenta* was a great success, since it not only alleviated Italian poverty to some extent, but also caused a regeneration of Italian farming. Wealthy nobles followed the example and founded similar schemes of their own, so that soon several thousand children were being provided for in Italy, and more in the provinces as the concept spread. The *alimenta* was to remain in place until the time of Diocletian. Additionally, for Italy's urban poor, Nerva granted allotments of land worth sixty million *sesterces*, and he exempted parents and their children from the five per cent inheritance tax.

These were popular measures, but they did not entirely succeed in winning everyone over to Nerva's principate. The conspiracy of Gaius Calpurnius Crassus, a descendant of the wealthy first triumvir, was uncovered and suppressed, and Crassus exiled, but the discontent of the praetorian guards was a greater worry. Dissatisfied that Nerva had not deified Domitian, they mutinied under the praetorian prefect Casperius Aelianus—Domitian's appointee—in October 97. Taking the emperor hostage, it was demanded that Nerva hand over Domitian's murderers. Nerva had no option but to comply. Ignominiously, he was forced before the Roman mob to give a speech of thanks to the mutineers for their public-spirited action.

These two events coupled with growing unrest among the

provincial troops convinced Nerva that he must appoint a successor who could not only keep order among the soldiers, but would also appeal to them. For this reason he passed over his male relatives and chose Marcus Ulpius Traianus (Trajan), announcing his appointment in late October 97 at the celebration of a victory in Pannonia over the Quadi and Marcomanni. Trajan was immediately acclaimed as Caesar and *imperator*, granted the *tribunicia potestas* and named as Nerva's consular colleague for the following year.

The adoption of Trajan by Nerva is one of the most significant moments in the Roman empire's history, not because he was adopting a person outside his immediate family—that had been done by the Julio-Claudians—and not because he was pointing to a successor popular with the army. That, after all, was essential. What is extraordinary is that Trajan was not even an Italian. Now a man from the provinces could aspire to the purple. Trajan, who was based on the Rhine at the time of his adoption, did not come to Rome but stayed with his troops; and he was there at Moguntiacum when Nerva died.

On January 1, 98, the start of his fourth consulship, Nerva suffered a stroke. Three weeks later he died at his villa in the Gardens of Sallust. From his headquarters on the Rhine, Trajan insisted that Nerva's ashes be placed in the mausoleum of Augustus and asked the senate to vote on his deification.

Trajan

Marcus Ulpius Nerva Traianus

[Nominated October 97; Augustus January 28, AD 98 to August 9, 117]

During a happy period of more than fourscore years, the public administration was conducted by the virtue and abilities of Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, and the two Antonines.

So said Gibbon in his massive work *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* of the period he rightly considered to be ancient Rome's apogee. Of these five, Trajan—undoubtedly one of the greatest warrior-emperors of all time—was one of Roman history's most admirable figures, a man who by his actions deserved the renown that he enjoyed in his lifetime and in subsequent generations.

The home of the Ulpii was the Latin colony of Italica in Baetica (close to modern Seville), and Trajan was born there on September 18, 53. His mother Marcia had given birth to a daughter, Ulpia Marciana, five years before her son's arrival. The Ulpii had settled in the region late in the third century BC, but Trajan's father—also Marcus—was the first Ulpian to pursue a senatorial career. Born c.30, he is thought to have been an officer under Nero's famous general Domitius Corbulo in the early sixties. *Legatus legionis* of X Fretensis during the Jewish War, Vespasian rewarded him with a *propraetorship* and then a *suffect consulship* in 70. At the end of his term he was *adlected* by the emperor and returned to his native province of Baetica as its governor. There followed the governorships of Syria, Africa, and Asia. He probably died before 100, having seen his son become emperor, and was deified in 113 as *Divus Traianus Pater*.

The young Trajan, then, was supported by his father's sparkling career, and determined not to let him down. Maddeningly, the historical sources are scant on information about his early years, but we know that in the mid-seventies when he was about twenty-two he was an officer under his father in Syria. He married a woman much younger than himself, Pompeia Plotina, from Nemausus (Nîmes) in Gaul Narbonensis. He was a *quaestor* in c.78 and *praetor* in c.84. In 86, he was made a guardian to a child named Publius Aelius Hadrianus (Hadrian), a native of Trajan's home town of Italica, whose father had recently died. Domitian appointed Trajan to be *legatus legionis* of VII Gemina in Hispania Tarraconensis, and he took the legion to the Rhine in 89 to help crush the uprising of Antonius Saturninus. He next fought in the Dacian and Pannonian wars, and was rewarded with an ordinary consulship in 91. There followed the

governorship of Moesia Inferior and then that of Germania Superior. And it was in his headquarters at Moguntiacum that the young Hadrianus, now a military tribune, brought Trajan the news that he had been adopted by Nerva and nominated co-princeps and heir-designate.

Technically, because of all the imperial powers and prerogatives conferred on him, Trajan was already emperor before Nerva's death. Evidently, he felt no pressing need to go to Rome because after dispatching a solemn oath to never execute a senator, he proceeded to Pannonia. Being away from Rome at such a time would have been the undoing of any previous princeps, but at the properly mature age of forty-four conscientious, sober Trajan had the charisma to take command of the empire simultaneously with finishing a distant military campaign.

Sober may be a figure of speech, but as an army man Trajan was clearly no stranger to strong drink the way soldiers liked their wine—undiluted with water as was the norm. On the other hand, he took his new responsibilities seriously enough to inform the palace servants to restrain from serving him further alcohol once he attained a satisfactory level of inebriation. The histories, even those written soon after his death, made such a paragon of Trajan that it is easy to see him virtually as a divine being in a way his predecessors wished to be and never were. But Trajan was all too human and certainly indulged in the pleasures of young male flesh. Cassius Dio tells us (although on what contemporary resource remains a mystery) that the Iceni Queen Boudicca sneered at Roman men for liking “soft couches with boys as bedfellows.”

Gay blogs and resources like to paint Trajan as a boy-harem keeper, among whom his successor Hadrian is included, but Cassius Dio (often mistakenly cited as the source of Trajan's homosexual extravagances) puts the exaggeration to the lie:

I know, of course, that he was devoted to boys and to wine, but if he had ever committed or endured any base or wicked deed as the result of this, he would have incurred censure; as it was, however, he drank all the wine he wanted, yet remained sober, and in his relation with boys he harmed no one.

In his sterling work *Trajan: Optimus Princeps* (Routledge, 1997), Julian Bennett points out the Roman laxity toward sexuality, especially among the upper classes, and the pederastic overtones adopted from the Greeks. “Such rakishness was generally considered

an attribute of social class, an aspect of dissoluteness rather than a singular predisposition to same-sex activities.” He adds that effeminacy—being the willing passive partner in a homosexual relationship between two adult males—was considered deviant behavior. On the other hand, to be the dominant active partner “was considered proof of virility and masculinity whatever the sex or age of the passive partner, rather than representative of a particular sexual orientation.” In other words, Trajan, in having sex as the dominant partner with adolescent boys, was doing nothing particularly wrong, and he would have most likely have been in the passive position as a young army recruit in his teenage years.

He spent the winter of 98 on the Danube, and did not reach Rome until the spring of 99. When he finally did arrive, his modest entry on foot indicated a common touch from the first. He embraced members of the senate, instantly bridging the chasm that Domitian and many predecessors had created. His wife Plotina was equally modest. On entering the palace she said, “I enter here such a woman as I would hope to be when I depart.”

In sharp contrast to Nerva’s treatment of Domitian (of whom Trajan seems to have cautiously approved), he saw to the deification of Nerva, and then spent two years winning over all the classes of Rome. Yet Trajan’s policies essentially continued those of Domitian; he was no less master of the state and had ultimate authority over all individuals, but his good nature and respect for those who had until recently been his superiors won him great acclaim. He was unofficially styled *Optimus Princeps* (the best first man) by the people. This title appeared on his coins from 105, but according to Dio Cassius he was not conferred the title officially until 114.

The Dacian Wars

Trajan found military life more enjoyable than the comforts and trappings of the imperial palace—he had spent more than ten years as a tribune in the army—it was in his nature to want to push Rome's frontiers beyond those of Augustus, Claudius, and the Flavians. And like Claudius, he might also have considered that a successful campaign of conquest would bolster his new reign. He had already signaled that the wily rogue King Decebalus of Dacia would be the first target in 98–99. Preparations for a great campaign began, with the transfer of legions and their attached auxiliaries from the Rhine, Britannia, and other provinces, and the enrolment of two new legions: II Traiana and XXX Ulpia. This brought the empire's total strength to thirty legions, the highest number yet reached since the time of Augustus.

The political pretexts for an invasion of Dacia were several, not least the aggressive preparations of its king. But from merchants the Romans understood that the land north of the Danube was rich in gold, silver, and essential minerals. At the outset of his reign, a fat profit from conquest would be extremely useful. In 101 the emperor took the field with a large army estimated to have been about a hundred thousand men. The war required all the military technology, engineering and discipline for which the Roman army was renowned. The old road of Tiberius on the Roman bank of the Danube in the region known as Porta Ferea (the Iron Gates) was completely rebuilt. In his company was the brilliant civil engineer Apollodorus of Damascus, in whom Trajan was most fortunate. Apollodorus converted the old narrow path in the spectacular gorge into a breathtaking highway by cantilevering the road out from the sheer face of the rock so that the legionaries felt as though they were marching on water.

Trajan split his massive army in two. The first force crossed the river at Viminacium (Kostolac, Serbia) and advanced along the western flank of the Transylvanian Alps toward a pass known as the Iron Gate, while the second column crossed at Drobeta and made for the Vulcan Pass, to the southeast of Decebalus's stronghold at Sarmizegethusa. The first force won a victory at Tapae, where Domitian's general Tettius Julianus had defeated the Dacians in 89, but this failed to break the enemy's resistance by the time the winter set in. The forced break in hostilities was not wasted: the troops trained and engineers built more portable war engines. In the early spring Trajan moved with great speed, this time with a united force.

The legions crossed into Dacia at Drobeta and then drove through the Carpathian passes into the heart of Transylvania. In 102 Decebalus was forced to a humiliating peace, and Roman garrisons were stationed in Banat and Transylvania. For its better protection, Pannonia was divided, as Domitian had done with Moesia, into Superior and Inferior provinces, jointly receiving an increased garrison of five legions. Trajan then returned to Rome, celebrated a triumph, and added the title Dacicus to his nomenclature.

Decebalus, however, once left to his own devices, undertook to challenge Rome again. Having secretly rearmed, in 105 the Dacians overwhelmed the Roman garrisons north of the Danube and began raiding across the river in Moesia. Trajan responded immediately by gathering an even larger army. It is worth noting that Domitian's pacification of the Chatti, lampooned by Tacitus and Suetonius, had been so successful that Trajan felt confident in leaving only four legions in both provinces of Germania. One of the borrowed legions was I Minerva, commanded by Trajan's ward Hadrian. The army crossed the Danube early in 106 at Drobeta, using the massive bridge recently completed by Apollodorus—traces of its sixty stone piers still survive—and fought its way into Transylvania, and annexed the country to the empire. Decebalus, driven from his capital of Sarmizegethusa, chose to commit suicide rather than to be paraded in a Roman triumph and then be ritually strangled.

Over the next three years the new province was treated to a rapid process of romanization, with road building and the planting of colonies inhabited by citizens drawn mostly from the eastern provinces. The Dacians who escaped slavery were transported to the south bank of the Danube and resettled. Even as this was happening, Trajan ordered the annexation of Arabia Petraea (in modern Jordan) on the death of Dabel, the Nabataean king. Since the days of Pompey the Great it had been a client kingdom, largely inhabited by nomadic Arabs, although cities such as Petra had grown wealthy on the lucrative trade routes to the east that passed through it. The smaller northern part was annexed to Syria, while the southern region became the new province of Arabia, with its capital at Bostra.

[12. Link to: Nerva and Trajan](#)

[Family Tree: Nervo-Trajanic and Antonines](#)

Trajan's Building program

The two Dacian wars had taxed Roman resources, but the vast wealth of the Dacian mines that now came to Rome as war booty enabled Trajan to support an extensive construction program almost everywhere, but above all in Italy and in Rome. Under the care of the tireless Apollodorus, Trajan set about transforming the capital. He had already commenced building a new forum behind that of Julius Caesar and beside that of Augustus, but the remaining room under the rising Quirinal was insufficient for his enlarged scheme. Accordingly, Apollodorus had a massive swathe cut into the hillside and completely removed the low col joining the Capitol to the Quirinal to make room. The rise of the Quirinal was then cleverly used to create a massive, tiered shopping center, much of it still visible today. The Forum of Trajan—the largest of all the Roman imperial forums—comprised the Basilica Ulpia, which served as a law-court, and two libraries, one Greek, one Latin. Between them rose Trajan's Column, sculpted with twenty-three spiral bands filled with two thousand five hundred figures, depicting the history of both Dacian wars. Unusually, Trajan did not construct a temple in its precincts, a matter rectified later by Hadrian.

To the northeast of the Colosseum, using a great part of Nero's Domus Aurea as the foundation, he built the largest baths complex in Rome, which would be exceeded in scale only by those of Caracalla and Diocletian. This required a new aqueduct, the Aqua Paola, which still supplies water to modern Rome. In Italy the Aqua Traiana was built in 109 to supply southern Etruria, and a new road linking Beneventum to Brundisium of the same year supplemented the southern section of the ancient Via Appia. He also involved himself in civil projects such as the harbors of Tarracina and Centumcellae (Civitavecchia), the ports for Rome, and at Ancona and Brundisium on the Adriatic. When old Ostia had silted up, Claudius had built a new harbor for Rome one and a half miles to the north (Portus). Now, Trajan enlarged the facilities, adding a massive hexagonal-shaped basin linked to the outer basin of Claudius by a channel and to the Tiber by a canal which bypassed the silted up lower Tiber and link Portus to Rome for barge traffic.

Trajan was as passionate about games as anyone, and could be as extravagant. Now in his fifty-fourth year, he celebrated his return to Rome in 107 with games that outdid those of Titus by running for a hundred and twenty-three consecutive days, and in which more than

eleven thousand gladiators lost their lives. Augustus did not get through as many as this in his entire long reign. These were just the first of many such lavish spectacles. Not only the Colosseum but also the Circus Maximus was kept busy. It was Trajan who had the space improved from a string of wooden tiers into the massive stone monument that would find imitators all over the empire. In conjunction with Trajan's increase of the grain dole to the Roman mob, the contemporary satirist Juvenal wrote:

Nam qui dabat olim / imperium, fasces, legiones, omnia, nunc se / continet, atque duas tantum res anxius optat, / panem et circenses.

This loosely translates as: "Long ago the people shed their anxieties, ever since we do not sell our votes to anyone. For the people—who once conferred imperium, symbols of office, legions, everything—now hold themselves in check and anxiously desire only two things, the grain dole and chariot races in the Circus."

Juvenal's famous phrase, *panem et circenses* (bread and circuses), pointed to the political importance of chariot races in diverting energies that might otherwise have gone into rioting, and it was chariot racing, not gladiatorial combat, that was the most popular spectator sport in Rome.

A Great Care for the Provinces

To this point, the empire's politics could be chiefly characterized by the relationship between the princeps and the senate; whether it more—or less—conformed to Augustus's fiction of a determining senate with the guidance of the emperor. After him, with the occasional exceptions of Nero (thanks to Seneca and Burrus) and Claudius from time-to-time, the principate had been either aloof or downright autocratic. Trajan's was as autocratic as any, but his good relations with the senate allowed him to accomplish whatever he wished without much opposition. In his generally modest demeanor, it was his *auctoritas* that was more important than his *imperium*. Writing in the biography of his father-in-law Agricola, Tacitus spoke glowingly of the newly won compatibility of autocratic rule and individual liberty established by Nerva and expanded by Trajan. Whether we should really believe that the principate and liberty had been made compatible, this was evidently held to be so by Rome's aristocracy.

It is easy to see why this belief should have been widespread. Claudius had perfected the Imperial Civil Service, but controlled its activities through his personal freedmen, rarely allowing any of the senatorial order to interfere. Trajan formed a professional elite from among senators to order and control the state's functions. He had no need to hog the office of consul to bolster his principate. During the twenty years of his reign, he held the consulship only six times, compared to Vespasian's nine and Domitian's seventeen. In the history of the empire to this point, only twelve *privati* had achieved the eminence of a third consulship; Agrippa had been the first. During Trajan's reign three served for their third time—Sextus Julius Frontinus (ordinary, 100), Titus Vestricius Spurinna (suffect, 100), Lucius Licinius Sura (ordinary, 107)—and ten served their second consulships. What these men had in common was their service as colleagues or juniors with Trajan from his days as a soldier, several were his prime legates in the Dacian wars. He trusted them and, more importantly, they trusted the emperor. They were all of proven ability, energetic, used to strict organization and decisive action, and happy to take orders. In this, they combined the best of Republican government's military nobility, but without the wastage of experience caused by the Republic's annual rotation of senior offices.

One taxing problem had arisen from the expansion and Romanization of the empire. Government service and the opportunities for quick wealth had taken many Italians abroad,

draining Italy's *municipia* of human resources. The provinces were also suffering in a reverse fashion as the local nobility increasingly gravitated toward Rome in search of greater political opportunities, draining their towns of experienced government. While this process had been gradual, and in Trajan's time was not yet far advanced, the signs were clear and he acted to prevent future increases in waste, at least in the field of finance. The emperor appointed *curatores* who, as representatives of the central government, assumed financial control of local authorities, both in Italy and in the provinces. The first recorded Italian *municipium* to receive a curate is Caere in 113. In the case of the *liberae* like Athens, whose finances were in need of regulation, Trajan had already sent a curate in 109. The situation was little better in some of the senatorial provinces, and the one we know the most about is Bithynia, to which Trajan sent Pliny the Younger in 111.

The extensive correspondence between the two is preserved and has given scholars a remarkable insight into Trajan's thinking; it certainly indicates that he wished to combine humanitarianism with discipline. It also points up Trajan's dislike of secret clubs that might focus disaffection with the regime .

One of the secret clubs Pliny encountered in Bithynia that gave him cause for concern was that of the Christians. He wrote to Trajan:

I have never participated in trials of Christians. I therefore do not know what offenses it is the practice to punish or investigate, and to what extent.... Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished.... Soon accusations spread, as usually happens, because of the proceedings going on, and several incidents occurred. An anonymous document was published containing the names of many persons.

Trajan responded:

You observed proper procedure, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those who had been denounced to you as Christians. For it is not possible to lay down any general rule to serve as a kind of fixed standard. They are not to be sought out; if they are denounced and proved guilty, they are to be punished, with this reservation, that whoever denies that he is a Christian and really proves it—that is, by worshipping our gods—even

though he was under suspicion in the past, shall obtain pardon through repentance. But anonymously posted accusations ought to have no place in any prosecution. For this is both a dangerous kind of precedent and out of keeping with the spirit of our age.

Matters of Succession and Parthians

Trajan had no close male relatives, a considerable factor in his following Nerva's precedent of passing the principate to one not of his family. The good relations he fostered with the senatorial and equestrian orders were extended to the women of his family. The virtuously modest qualities of his wife Pompeia Plotina have already been noted above and remained unchanged despite her elevation to Augusta in 105. She survived Trajan, dying probably in 121, and was honored with a temple shared with her husband that Hadrian built in Trajan's Forum.

Trajan was close to his sister Marciana, five years his elder. She received the title Augusta, along with Plotina, in 105 and was deified on her death in 112. Her daughter Matidia became Augusta on her mother's death, and was in her turn deified in 119. Hadrian celebrated their names with basilicas in the Campus Martius and the temple of *Divae Matidiae*. Trajan's women played important roles, traveling with the emperor on public business and were frequently involved in making major decisions. They were respected throughout the empire, included on monuments as well as in inscriptions. Plotina, Marciana, and Matidia, for example, all appear on the dedicatory arch at Ancona harbor along with Trajan. His grandniece Vibia Sabina, daughter of Matidia, married Hadrian in 100, and is the only indication we have that Trajan considered Hadrian a potential successor. The union survived almost to the end of Hadrian's subsequent principate, in spite of the couple's mutual dislike. It was to be the women who would play a pivotal role in the succession when Trajan died.

The annexation of Dacia had secured the Danube frontier, but Rome's eastern boundary was less certain. The great semi-circle of Roman lands stretching between Syria across Cappadocia to the Pontus Euxinus (Black Sea) was vulnerable to encroachment by the Parthian empire from Mesopotamia. Here, there were few natural obstacles to mark a secure frontier. An uneasy peace had existed between Rome and Parthia since the time of Nero, but the buffer state of Armenia in the north of the region posed a problem. By agreement with Nero, Rome had not annexed Armenia to the empire in return for maintaining a client king on the throne. In theory, at least, this king was supposed to rule in Rome's name, but with the approval of the Parthian king.

During Trajan's reign, the Caucasian tribe of Alans, beginning to feel pressure from migrating Huns, were threatening Armenia. Were

they to be allowed to continue, it would turn into a flood and threaten imperial frontiers. Trajan decided that instead of keeping a Roman nominee on the Armenian throne he would annex the country. Since this was almost certain to result in an unstable province with a hostile enemy to the south, the seizure of Armenia necessitated the annexation of Mesopotamia, and war with Parthia. Given his later actions, it seems likely that Hadrian cautioned against such an enterprise, fearing that Rome's manpower would be insufficient. Trajan probably counted on the chronic internal struggles of the Parthians to hinder an effective response.

However, it was Parthia that made the first bellicose move in 113 when King Chosroes I (Khosrow) appointed Exedares, the son of his brother and predecessor, to the throne of Armenia, in breach of the Neronian agreement. For Trajan, the coronation of Exedares constituted a *casus belli* and he declared war. He sailed to Antioch in October 113 and mobilized the Syrian army. As the preparations for an advance into Armenia progressed, Khosrow—who was indeed suffering dynastic problems at home—attempted a compromise. He offered to remove Exedares and replace him with his other nephew, Parthamisir. It is not clear how this was intended to placate Trajan, who in any event refused to give a clear response, even though Exedares was deposed and replaced.

In the spring of 114 Trajan crossed the upper Euphrates, probably at Melitene, and advanced into Armenia. The local elite flocked to him and swore loyalty. At Elegeia near Theodosiopolis (Erzerum), Parthamisir laid down his crown before Trajan, who did not return it, and he pronounced Armenia a Roman province. He had won a bloodless victory without encountering the real enemy, and he had no intention of waiting for Parthia to react. After wintering in Antioch, the Roman force struck into Parthian territory in the spring of 115. Trajan built forts along his lines of communication and pressed further to the east, eventually reaching the Parthian capital of Ctesiphon in February 116. Having advanced as far as the Persian Gulf, garrisoning wherever possible, Trajan returned to Babylon for the winter. There are indications that the emperor entertained an ambition to equal Alexander the Great's conquests. According to the historian Eutropius in his *Historiae Romanae Breviarium* (Abridgment of Roman History), written c.369 and dedicated to the emperor Valens: "He also fitted out a fleet for the Mare Erythraeum [Red Sea], that he might use it to lay waste the coasts of India."

If the anecdote is true, it was not to be Trajan's destiny. From this point on, events turned against him. The Parthians had traded land for time, and the territories so easily won were much more difficult to hold. The Roman communications were long and the forts spread dangerously thin on the ground. Uprisings all along the line threatened the precarious Roman hold. Trajan was forced to give up his newest province of Parthia by appointing a client king, Parthamaspatēs, and begin a gradual retreat to Mesopotamia. This arrangement proved to be short-lived. As soon as the Roman legions had left Ctesiphon, Khosrow returned and expelled Parthamaspatēs. The weary Roman army returned to Antioch early in 117.

The invasion of Parthia sparked a terrible rebellion that overtook the eastern provinces. After the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by Titus, the Jews had been dispersed from Judaea and a large number had settled in Mesopotamia. They hated the Romans with a fierce passion, and as early as 115 rose up, the insurrection rapidly spreading to those Jews settled in Egypt, Cyprus, and North Africa. It is thought as many as a million people on both sides of the divide were slaughtered between 115 and 117. Trajan dispatched trusted legates to the worst-hit regions and left for Rome, intending to direct operations from there; but he never completed the journey. Pausing briefly at Selinus in Cilicia, the emperor suffered a stroke and died within a few days on August 9, 117—a little over a month short of his sixty-fourth birthday—with his wife Plotina and his praetorian prefect Acilius Attianus at his bedside.

Trajan's reign was one of the best periods in Roman history and is the moment when it reached its greatest extent, embracing the Mediterranean with openings on the Atlantic, the Black, Caspian, and Red seas, and—very briefly—the Persian Gulf. He richly deserved his title of *Optimus Princeps*, not only for his very real achievements, but also for the quality of his mercy (at least toward Roman citizens) and the modesty of his principate. Eschewing any notions of divinity, the soldier-emperor preferred to see himself portrayed as an ordinary man, a *civilis*, a term that indicated comportment suitable for a Roman citizen. It is how he appears on the magnificent arch erected at Beneventum (Benevento), surrounded by scenes of everyday life, ordinary citizens, businessmen, and the children he did so much to support through the expansion of Nerva's *alimenta*. Time only increased Trajan's aura. In the late fourth century, when the empire had dramatically changed in character, each new emperor was hailed

with the prayer, “*felicior augusto, melior traiano!*” (More fortunate than Augustus, better than Trajan).

Hadrian

Publius Aelius Hadrianus / Imperator Caesar Traianus Hadrianus
Augustus

[Augustus August 11, 117 to July 10, 138]

Hadrian's Aelian ancestors had moved from Hadria, a small town in Picentine Italy to Italica in Hispania Baetica generations before his birth at the conclusion of the Second Punic War. The ancient histories are divided on whether he was actually born in Italica or in Rome, but it hardly mattered to a Roman, it was the *patria* that counted. (Today it is believed that he was born in Rome, and only spent a brief period as a child in Italica before returning to the capital.) Hadrian was born on January 24, 76. His mother, Domitia Paulina, came from a distinguished family of Gades (Cadiz), which under the Romanization policy had grown into one of the empire's wealthiest cities. His father, Publius Aelius Afer, had climbed the *cursus honorum* to the point of praetor by the time of his death. Hadrian was a second cousin of Trajan (Hadrian's grandmother and Trajan's father were siblings). When Hadrian, aged only nine, lost his father in 85 Trajan became one his guardians; the other was Acilius Attianus, another eminent man of Italica, who was appointed praetorian prefect by Trajan shortly before the emperor's death.

As soon as he came of age, Hadrian began a rapid rise up the *cursus honorum*. He was only eighteen when he became a *vingtivir* in 94 (history does not reveal which particular duty Hadrian was assigned) and for three consecutive years between 95 and 97 he was a military tribune with Legion II Adiutrix in Pannonia, V Macedonica in Moesia Inferior, and XXII Primigenia in Germania Superior. In 101 he became a quaestor, a plebeian tribune in 105, and praetor in 106. In the same year Trajan appointed him *legatus legionis* of I Minerviae in Germania Inferior. In the following year he was *legatus pro praetore* of Pannonia Inferior, and in 108 suffect consul, ten years before the traditional age for the office. This meteoric career was clearly unusual, but at the point in 117 when he was *legatus Syriae* and Trajan died, there was no indication from the princeps that Hadrian would succeed. Some other Augustan signs were there: he had been appointed commander of a legion before holding the praetorship and governor of a military province before becoming a consul. He was related to Trajan and had married his grandniece Vibia Sabina. More importantly, however, was the unavoidable fact that at that moment there was no better contender for the throne.

On the day after Trajan's death his wife Plotina and the praetorian prefect Attianus, Hadrian's surviving guardian, announced that on his deathbed Trajan had adopted Hadrian. Plotina, Attianus, and Hadrian's mother-in-law Matidia set off immediately for Rome to ensure the succession. Popular scandal held that Plotina had forged the adoption papers because she was secretly in love with Hadrian. Since they were almost the same age, there may be some truth to this, but Rome was ever a hotbed of gossip. On August 11, 117 the troops of Syria hailed forty-one-year-old Hadrian as their emperor, the day he considered his *dies imperii*. Hadrian remained in Syria, but wrote to the senate to request divine honors for Trajan and to confirm his accession to the principate. He added the usual promise that he would never execute a senator. The senate's acquiescence was a mere formality in the face of the Syrian army's proclamation. Trajan was deified and permission given for the burial of his ashes within the *pomerium*—a signal honor, since burial within the boundary of the sacred *pomerium* had been forbidden for centuries. They were eventually interred at the base of his column in his own forum.

There were immediate signs of disaffection among some in the senatorial class. Attianus informed Hadrian that the urban prefect, Baebius Macer, and two exiles, Maximus Laberius and the Gaius Calpurnius Crassus who had rebelled against Nerva, were stirring up trouble. Crassus was killed while trying to leave his place of exile, but Hadrian took no action against the other two, a show of clemency he hoped would calm any other disaffected senators. From Antioch he now proceeded with a policy in marked contrast to previous emperors who felt uneasy that their elevation might be disputed: that of expanding the empire's frontiers. Retrenchment and consolidation characterized Hadrian's reign, convinced as he was that the empire had reached the limits of its resources. He began immediately, recalling the troops from the lower Euphrates and abandoning Trajan's newest provinces to client kings.

This abrupt reversal of Trajan's foreign policy was unpopular among the Roman elite, and further unrest broke out in Rome, even as Hadrian's mollifying policies were calming the Jews in the eastern provinces, and the stern actions of his trusted legate Quintus Marcius Turbo were restoring order in Mauretania.

A plot against the emperor's life was uncovered and its implications were so serious that finally Hadrian hastened to Rome from Syria, arriving on July 9, 118. He was too late, however, to prevent the

executions of the conspiracy's four ringleaders: Lucius Publilius Celsus, Lucius Cornelius Palma, Lucius Quietus, and Gaius Avidius Nigrinus. Senators and consulars, they were also close associates of Trajan's and probably resented Hadrian's adoption, as well as the dismemberment of the great emperor's expansionist policy.

Hadrian maintained that the executions took place without his consent. Whether true or not, their elimination made the new emperor's course easier and silenced opposition among the alarmed nobility to his frontier policy. The senators never forgave him, however, for breaking his solemn promise to them, and he was obliged to swear in person never again to mete out punishment to any senator unless the senatorial court decreed otherwise. But the odium the executions had raised caused him dismay until the end of his days. He made amends by holding lavish games to soothe the Roman plebs and by holding only his third—and last—consulship in 119, leaving the office free to the senate without hindrance. He was similarly sparing in his acceptance of other titles; and only became *Pater Patriae* in 128.

The obvious flaw in Hadrian's policy of staying within the frontiers and avoiding engagement in foreign wars was that a static army loses its edge, grows demoralized, and becomes a potential cause of trouble. Further, that the warlike tribes massing against the frontiers might interpret the Romans hiding behind their fortifications as a sign of weakness. In this, Hadrian was fortunate that the empire enjoyed peace throughout his reign, possibly because Trajan had convinced the tribal chieftains that attacking Rome was a dangerous task; at least for the time being.

In order to keep the frontier armies and garrisons up to scratch he made continual tours of inspection, organizing a constant round of exercises and reviews. As a result, only half of his reign was spent in Rome. A greater degree of equality was introduced to the army by increasing the men's comforts and leveling those of the officers. He was strict in ensuring that promotions were earned for merit, not favor, and earned the soldiers' devotion for his efforts. Hadrian also placed a greater reliance on the use of native auxiliary cavalry than had been the case previously, and reversed Vespasian's practice of only allowing them to serve under Roman officers. In fact, by this time it was rare to find Italian officers, except at the highest level, most being enrolled from among the provincials. Throughout these reviews, Cassius Dio tells us, the emperor "led a rigorous life and either walked

or rode on horseback on all occasions, never once at this period setting foot in either a chariot or a four-wheeled vehicle.”

While Hadrian’s travels were primarily motivated by matters military, he was probably Rome’s most curious emperor, interested in a wide spectrum of his world: sport, science, architecture, literature, art, nature, and especially Greek culture—he was sufficiently vain to curl his hair with tongs in the Greek manner. Writing in the third century, Tertullian refers to Hadrian as being “*omnium curiositatum explorator*,” which means he may be regarded as the first imperial sightseer. And his behavior when traveling often resembled that of a modern tourist, visiting all the sites and monuments, climbing mountains to admire views of the sunset. His travels were also to visit the frontiers.

Hadrian's Consolidation of the Frontier

As a princeps with a care for the empire, Hadrian's main purpose was to avoid foreign wars and in pursuit of this policy he determined to return to the Flavian frontiers. However, this raised the concern that consolidation and lack of aggression across the borders would encourage barbarian ravages. To this point, the Roman frontiers had relied on traditional legionary camps and mobile garrisons, but now Hadrian erected many major and permanent structures. Having withdrawn from the short-lived Persian provinces, the emperor gave close attention to northern Europe. In Britannia the Roman garrisons were thinly dispersed in a line that stretched north from the Tinea (Tyne) valley to a small camp at modern Inchtuthil, near Perth. That the troops were vulnerable is attested to by the disappearance of legion IX Hispania, which was wiped out during a serious tribal uprising at about the time of Hadrian's accession.

It was clear that the legionary resources there were overstretched, and Hadrian decided to pull back from lowland Caledonia to establish a firm frontier along the line of Agricola's original boundary between Luguvalium (Carlisle) and Segedunum (Wallsend, Gateshead). The best preserved of Hadrian's permanent frontier structures is the famous wall that bears his name in northern England. Stretching between the Ituna Aestuarii and the Tinea Aestuarii (Solway Firth and Tyne estuary), it was fully seventy-three miles long. Construction began in 122, the work being carried out by legionaries, and was completed by 128. The core was of lime concrete with a facing of dressed stone. It averaged fifteen feet (4.6m) in height and was intended to be ten feet (3m) thick, although modifications to the plan meant that it only reached this thickness at the base—and not always as much as that along its entire length.

Small forts with sally-ports were built at a regular distance of one Roman mile, and in time sixteen main forts were attached to the wall; it is not known how many were erected during Hadrian's reign. The actual wall was only one part of the defenses. Immediately to its north a V-shaped ditch was dug out to a depth of ten feet and with a width at ground level of twenty-seven feet (8m). Just to the south of the wall the so-called Vallum was dug after the wall had been built. A flat-bottomed ditch with a raised bank on either side, its primary purpose was to keep civilians away from the military zone. "Vallum" is how it is known today, although the word means "wall" and so is hardly appropriate for a ditch.

The wall proved to be a formidable obstacle to the Caledonian tribes, and yet it is hard to imagine that the ditch and wall alone would have kept out a determined attack —and indeed in future years there would be several serious incursions south of Hadrian's Wall. But the sheer scale of this undertaking was designed to prove Roman might and deter insurrection rather than act as an impregnable defensive barrier. It also served an economic purpose in defining Roman boundaries, allowing the tithing of goods passing in either direction, since the wall was porous to authorized north-south trade. The fifteen thousand auxiliaries who manned the wall, drawn from various parts of the empire, were a further bar to Caledonian marauders, and it is a testament to the project's success that it enabled the Romans to maintain a presence as far north as this for almost three centuries after its construction.

Hadrian's other great fortification can be found on the two hundred-mile section of the frontier stretching between the upper reaches of the Rhine and Danube known as the *limes Germanicus*. Unlike the British wall, the *limes* (plural *limites*) were constructed of split-oak trunks embedded in a ditch and fastened on the inside by cross-planking. This explains why they have suffered far more over the centuries than the concrete and stone-faced Hadrian's Wall. Of similar construction, the hundred-mile-long palisade on the Raetian frontier followed the line established by Domitian between Lauriacum (Lorch) and the Danube near Abusina (Eining). No defenses of this kind have been found along the lower Danube frontier; this is not really surprising since Dacia provided substantial protection and was well garrisoned. The term *limites* refers less to a physical defensive construction than to an abstract concept that described the edge of the empire, its limit.

Hadrian's Administration

The provinces benefited from Hadrian's imperial perambulations, although in the first instance the cost of receiving the emperor and his "burdensome" retinue fell on the cities, colonies, and *municipia* no matter how modestly Hadrian comported himself. In almost all cases, however, the provincials received far more than they had to give. Hadrian undertook public works wherever he went; new roads and bridges, aqueducts, modern harbors, lavish temples, public baths, and games. Ephesus and Trapezus received new harbor installations, he built aqueducts at Athens and Corinth, and new roads were laid and bridges raised as far apart as Hispania and easternmost Moesia Inferior. In addition Hadrian was Rome's greatest city-builder. New cities sprang up all over the empire, many in the Danubian provinces. From Forum Hadriani in the extreme north (Voorburg-Arentsburg, Holland) to Colonia Julia Hadriana Avenio (Avignon) in Gaul, Hadrian's civic engineers were at work throughout his reign. The most famous is Hadrianopolis in Thracia, known better today as Adrianople (although it was renamed Edirne in the fifteenth century by the Ottoman Turks). Not every civil scheme met with approval, however: the rebuilding of Jerusalem was to be the cause of a dangerous rebellion.

As a part of his consolidation of the frontiers Hadrian extended municipal rights to many of the settlements that had sprung up around the great frontier legionary camps. None of his predecessors had allowed any such towns charters as *municipia*. In contrast he contemplated evacuating Dacia to conserve military resources, but was persuaded against a move that would have left so many recent settlers at the mercy of the local tribes. While the provinces gained much from Hadrian's construction activity and travels, adlection into the senate continued to deprive the provincial cities of wealthy and experienced administrators. As a consequence Hadrian was obliged to follow Trajan's precedent of sending in his own *curatores* to administer financially embarrassed localities.

Hadrian's attention to detail is also to be found in his famous codification of Roman law, also known as the Codification of the Praetor's Edict. In one respect, this can be seen as bringing within the principate's autocratic control an element of Roman life that had been allowed to escape it. On the other hand, it benefited citizens by providing a standard interpretation of the complex judicial processes that had grown up since the mid-Republican era. At that point in time

the urban praetors began to issue a statement of the program of legal procedure and interpretation that each proposed to follow during his term of office. In theory this fixed how the laws would be interpreted from that point on. However, his successor in office was not bound by this *edictum perpetuum*, in fact it was only when the *Lex Cornelia* of 67 BC was passed that a praetor was even obliged to abide by his own edict, let alone that of his predecessors.

Nevertheless, situations would arise in which, to suit the circumstances of the case being heard, the praetor needed to add to the body of law or modify an existing law to the extent that it might be considered a new law; not a state of affairs that recommends itself to autocratic rule. Therefore, Hadrian decided to codify all the accretions to the body of statute law in the form of his own *edictum perpetuum*, which would have binding force thereafter. If any additions or further modifications were to be necessary, it would be the emperor in future who would decide. For this monumental task Hadrian appointed a famous jurist, Salvius Julianus, who completed the work by 129, bringing together in a straightforward and modern document centuries of praetorian edicts. Hadrian's Edict has been lost, but many excerpts made by commentators on it survived in Justinian's Digest of the sixth century (covered in chapter seventeen).

Hadrian was not content to merely codify Roman law, he intended to see it efficiently administered, and to this end appointed four men of consular rank, each of whom toured two to three given districts of Italy. They were effectively circuit judges, known as the *Quattuorviri Consulares*. Augustus had organized Italy into eleven regions, but none of these was allowed to hold a judicial court, so Hadrian's innovation reduced the often-crippling costs of bringing an appeal to Rome and relieved pressure on the overcrowded courts of the emperor and urban praetor. Not surprisingly, it was popular with the provincial citizenry, but the senate hated it. In the Republican era the senate had treated Italy as its private provincial fiefdom; now the peninsula was the heartland of a great empire, and this novel function seemed to reduce it to the status of a quasi-province. Senatorial resistance to the *Quattuorviri Consulares* increased to the point that the office was abolished on the emperor's death. But Hadrian's wisdom was not to go unrecognized, and after two further reigns the office was revived, with some modifications.

Hadrian also devoted much time to supervising the public finances. His peaceful foreign policy, while disliked by the pro-Trajan faction of

the aristocracy, encouraged a great increase in trade, and the *fiscus* swelled without the outlay of money for warring armies. Past emperors had generally hoarded their surpluses, but Hadrian saw the sense of putting this into circulation for the general well-being. Some went into the lavish spectacles he provided, some into the many buildings erected in Rome and the provinces, more into the *alimenta* and similar welfare projects. The wasteful system of tax-farming, which had been in decline since the time of Augustus, was now abolished in favor of appointed officials. Collection of the largest single tax, levied on inheritance, was placed in the hands of twenty *procuratores hereditum*. To cut down on another area of waste, he appointed *advocati fisci* to determine the rights and wrongs in lawsuits brought against the treasuries.

The men for these new offices were selected from among the *Ordo Equester*, and were only some of the tasks with which Hadrian further enhanced the status of equestrians. He continued the advancement of *equites* begun by Augustus, Claudius, and the Flavians, but went further in creating an Imperial Civil Service that was finally removed from the household of the princeps, making its members public servants—although under the emperor's absolute control—rather than his personal agents. In doing so, he regularized the Service's composition, throwing out the freedmen, and making a civil career a proper *cursus* for *equites*. In doing so, he did away with the requirement of military service that every *eques* had previously been obliged to perform. As a logical consequence of this policy the most radically changed office was that of the highest equestrian, the praetorian prefect. His ceased to be a military function and he became a legal officer presiding over the princeps' judicial *consilium*.

Hadrian the Architect

Despite his prolonged absences from the capital, Rome was not ignored. Hadrian continued Trajan's energetic building program; it was a period when Rome underwent as great a transformation as it had under Augustus. Hadrian was almost certainly the most artistically gifted emperor that Rome ever produced. He became a fine public speaker, he was a student of philosophy who could hold his own with luminaries in their fields, he wrote poetry and an autobiography, and he was a superb architect. He completed Trajan's Forum with a large temple dedicated to Trajan and Plotina, and then, when he was about forty-five began construction of a temple on the Velia, the promontory overlooking the Colosseum, unique in design and, with a length of more than three hundred feet (91m), larger than any other ever built by the Romans. Work began in about 121 and took approximately fourteen years, and when it was completed it dominated the eastern end of the Forum Romanum. Gigantic statues of the seated goddesses Venus and Roma were placed inside its two chambers. Trajan's architect Apollodorus is said to have sneered at the statues' pompous scale and said that they would bang their heads if they were to stand up. He was probably jealous that the emperor was at least as capable—if not more inspired—an architect as himself. The complex was dedicated in 135 on April 21, traditionally Rome's *dies natalis* (birthday).

On the Campus Martius, Hadrian began the Hadrianeum or Temple of Neptune, which is interesting for its sculpted representations of the provinces, indicating the blurring of the distinction between Italy and the provinces that was taking place during his reign. Nearby, on the right bank of the Tiber above the Vatican, he commenced his mausoleum, larger than that of Augustus. Approached by a new bridge, the Pons Aelius, the mausoleum was still unfinished at the time of his death; both the mausoleum and Hadrianeum were completed by his successor, Antoninus Pius. Some twenty-five miles east of Rome, on the bank of the Anio at Tibur (Tivoli), Hadrian built his stupendously big palace. It was more a small city than a single complex, covering seven hundred acres and containing some hundred individual buildings in a multitude of architectural styles. Reflecting his life of travel, the adornment was superbly eclectic, although Greek styles predominated. Here Hadrian reconstructed many of the places he had visited, such as the Canopus of Alexandria and the Vale of Tempe.

But Hadrian's crowning glory is the Pantheon built between 118 and 125 on the site of Agrippa's original in the Campus Martius. This extraordinary feat of engineering provided a dome that has a height exactly equal to its diameter—a perfect half-sphere. The dome's span was not surpassed until modern times, and is greater than that of St. Peter's in Rome. As was his modest custom, Hadrian inscribed the architrave with the original dedication of Agrippa; he seldom put his own name on a monument. The Pantheon was dedicated to all the Roman gods, but its complete survival is down to the Byzantine emperor Phocas, who gave the building to Pope Boniface IV in 608 to convert it into the church of Santa Maria ad Martyres.

[13. Link to: Hadrian—Builder and Traveler](#)

[Family Tree: Nervo-Trajanic and Antonines](#)

The Love of His Life

One aspect of Hadrian's life that is most widely known is his relationship with the handsome youth Antinoüs. In a footnote to Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the author wrote:

The deification of Antinoüs, his medals, statues, city, oracles, and constellation, are well known, and still dishonor the memory of Hadrian. Yet we may remark, that of the first fifteen emperors, Claudius was the only one whose taste in love was entirely correct.

In the mid-fourth century the bigoted St. Anathasius commented:

And such a one is the new God Antinoüs, that was the emperor Hadrian's minion and the slave of his unlawful pleasure... a sordid and loathsome instrument of his master's lust.

Antinoüs was born in the town of Claudiopolis in the province of Bithynia, probably on November 27 between 110 and 112. Very little is known about his parents, but his father was at least a freedman, since Hadrian would never have consorted with the son of a slave, and he may have been a provincial stone mason. Hadrian probably encountered Antinoüs during his trip to Bithynia in 123, when the boy would have been about twelve. The emperor's pederasty was widely known, his preference—in strict accordance with the Greek manner—being for boys above the age of thirteen. Accordingly, Hadrian concluded some kind of deal with the father, and had Antinoüs sent to Rome, to enter the imperial *paedagogium*. This institution, painted by some of the ancient histories as an infamous boy harem for the emperor, was a school for the education of future palace or civil service administrators. Its beginnings probably date from as early as the reign of Gaius Caligula, who would have housed his favorite charioteers there. Considering that most of its pupils would have been aged between ten and fourteen, there is perhaps an argument for its being in Hadrian's time a school for polishing handsome boys in courtly manners to be his companions.

By all accounts, Hadrian's infatuation with Antinoüs far exceeded his interest in any other youths. As the boy went to Rome, the emperor continued on his travels and so they did not meet again until 125, when Hadrian returned to the capital. From this point on until his untimely death Antinoüs remained constantly in Hadrian's company. The relationship was not likely to please Vibia Sabina. In a male-dominated Roman world, the barrenness of their marriage was blamed on Hadrian's wife, but his sexual preferences can hardly be excluded from fault. Perhaps it was in compensation that he granted

Sabina the title of Augusta in 128, and always had her accompany him on his provincial visits; perhaps too she was being used as a convenient cover to divert prurient provincial attention from her husband's true love.

Disaster struck in October 130. The imperial court was visiting Egypt at the time, and Antinoüs suffered an accident and drowned in the Nile. Whether it was an accident, a suicide, or something more sinister has been a fruitful source for speculation ever since. Whichever, Hadrian's extravagant mourning should dispel any argument that their relationship was not that of homosexual lovers. The vituperative St. Anathasius was certain of his facts:

...and forthwith his Imperial Majesty issued an edict strictly requiring and commanding his loving subjects to acknowledge his departed page a deity and to pay him his quota of divine reverences and honors as such: a resolution and act which did more effectually publish and testify to the world how entirely the emperor's unnatural passion survived the foul object of it.

In his grief Hadrian raised a new city on the banks of the Nile that he named Antinöopolis, and he peopled it with Greco-Egyptian army veterans. The city became the center of a new cult to worship Antinoüs the god, and he entered the pantheon first of Egyptian deities and soon after that of the Romans. In his beloved Greece Hadrian further encouraged the cult's growth, and traces survived in Achaea for another two hundred years. At his palace in Tibur and elsewhere, Hadrian erected numerous statues of the beautiful youth. Indeed, his obsession with three-dimensional representation was responsible for a vigorous revival of classical Greek sculpture and the temporary vanishing of Roman carved reliefs, normally so abundant.

Having seen to the rites for Antinoüs, Hadrian moved from Egypt to Judaea, where his normally benign care for his subjects was transformed into exceptional ineptness; perhaps his judgment was impaired by his recent bereavement. Jerusalem still lay in ruins and he determined to rebuild the city as a colony, which he named Aelia Capitolina. Aware of how troublesome the Jews could be, he decided to end its Jewish character by forbidding them to live in the refurbished city. Moreover, he proposed to build a temple to Jupiter on the site of the ruined Temple of Solomon. These insults led to a general Jewish uprising that flared into open war by 132 under the leadership of the Jewish prince Simon Bar Kokhba. The Jews registered some initial successes but were eventually ground down by

the size and strength of the Roman forces pitched against them.

At least six legions became involved and Bar Kokhba shrewdly avoided open battles instead opting for guerrilla tactics. But after three years of fighting, the flower of the Jewish forces was cornered at Bethar fortress, west of Jerusalem in 135, to be cut down by the Romans. Vengeance belonged to Hadrian, who killed or enslaved any Jews who had not already fled the region in the great diaspora. Jerusalem was entirely Romanized, Judaism banned, and the name Judaea erased from the map by renaming the province Syria Palaestina, or simply Palaestina. The Jews were now entirely without a homeland, and would remain so until the mid-twentieth century.

[14. Link to: Hadrian's Heirs](#)

A Complex Succession

At the conclusion of the Jewish rebellion Hadrian, now in his sixtieth year, was assailed by an illness (probably tuberculosis) that made him irritable and testy, especially with the senatorial class whom he suspected disapproved of his interest in Hellenistic culture, always an un-Roman taste. Moreover, although he was always polite toward them, the senators resented that he promulgated new laws by issuing *constitutiones principis* instead of *consulta senatum*. It was time to consider the succession seriously. Any aristocratic hopes that he would adopt his eighteen-year-old great-nephew Gnaeus Pedanius Fuscus Salinator were rudely dashed by the youth's sudden execution. There may have been some conspiring on the boy's behalf, but the execution increased senatorial hatred for the emperor who had been responsible, so they held, for the consular deaths at the start of his reign, and for which he had not been forgiven. In 136 he adopted Lucius Aelius and elevated him to the rank of Caesar. The selection was not popular, and odd anyway. Aelius had little to recommend him other than powerful political connections. His health was bad and he had no military experience. It has been suggested that he might have been Hadrian's bastard son, but there is no documentary evidence to support such a claim.

It turned out to be an unhappy choice because Aelius Caesar died of tuberculosis on January 1, 138. Hadrian turned to another and within six weeks adopted Titus Aurelius Fulvus Boionius Arrius Antoninus on February 25. Antoninus was fifty-one and a senator of blameless reputation, who may have been related to Hadrian's adoptive mother Plotina. No time was wasted in bestowing on him not only the *tribunicia potestas* and *imperium proconsulare* but also the praenomen *imperatoris*. Hadrian, with an eye to the future, wisely obliged Antoninus to adopt two sons to secure the succession beyond him: Antoninus's seventeen-year-old nephew Marcus Annius Verus and Lucius Ceionius Commodus, the seven-year-old son of the deceased Lucius Aelius Caesar. The former choice was a fortunate one, for he would become Marcus Aurelius, last of the great Roman emperors of the period; the latter was not so wise.

On July 10, 138, aged sixty-two, Hadrian died of his illness at Baiae, on the Bay of Naples. Having spent almost half of his reign away from Rome, and much time in Tibur when he was in Italy, and given his harsh treatment of senators and consulars, he had become a distant and unpopular character. Hadrian played a significant role

both in developing the foreign policies of the empire and in its continuing centralization of the administration. He remains an enigma, a man of so many disparate parts. Augustus was his proclaimed role model, but the real echoes are those of Claudius for his care of the empire, Nero for his interest in the arts, Vespasian for the supervision of the finances, and Trajan for his grasp of the empire itself. Few today would disagree that he was one of the most remarkable men Rome ever produced, and yet his passion for organization meant that he introduced reforms into the principate that resulted in the growth of the bureaucratic machine that would soon restrict initiative and ultimately destroy the empire.

THE ANTONINE DYNASTY

[AD 138–192]

Antoninus Pius

Titus Aurelius Fulvus Boionius Arrius Hadrianus Antoninus Pius

[Augustus July 10, 138 to March 7, 161]

Antoninus was born on September 19, 86 at Lanuvium, an old Latin city some twenty miles to the southeast of Rome. His father's family had originally migrated to Rome from Nemausus (Nîmes) in Gaul Narbonensis and established itself firmly in the senatorial class. His paternal grandfather, Titus Aurelius Fulvus, had twice been a consul and also held office as *praefectus urbi*; his father Aurelius Fulvus also held the consulship. On his mother Arria Fadilla's side his grandfather, Arrius Antoninus, had been consul twice. Most of Antoninus's youth was spent at Lorium, which was only twelve miles from Rome on the Via Aurelia. He later built a villa there, to which he would frequently retreat from the cares of the empire.

His early career appears to have been typical of that pursued by the sons of senatorial families. He entered public life while quite young, first as a quaestor in 112, then praetor in 117, and held his first consulship (ordinary) in 120 at the age of thirty-four. At some point between 110 and 115, Antoninus married Annia Galeria Faustina, the daughter of Marcus Annius Verus (whose nephew of the same name he would later adopt). Shortly after the expiration of his term as consul Hadrian selected him as one of the *Quattuorviri Consulares*, the magistrates of the four judicial districts into which the emperor had divided Italy. In 133–36 Antoninus served as proconsul of Asia—the only recorded time that he spent outside Italy—where his remarkable administrative qualities once again attracted Hadrian's attention. At the conclusion of his governorship Antoninus returned to Rome and was rewarded by being admitted to Hadrian's inner circle, a place on the *consilium principis*.

This exemplary career, then, was reason enough for Hadrian to adopt Antoninus after the death of his first-appointed successor, Lucius Aelius. Moreover, Antoninus had risen to be counted among the most respected of the senatorial order and a popular choice with the nobility. After the conferral of the imperial powers and prerogatives, Antoninus became joint-Augustus with Hadrian until the

latter's death, on which day he became sole ruler of the Roman empire in his fifty-second year. The succession was already secured by Antoninus's adoption of Marcus Annius Verus, his nephew by marriage, who became Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, and the younger Lucius Verus, son of Hadrian's first choice for successor, Lucius Aelius.

The senate, which had become embittered by Hadrian's raising of the *equites* to an almost equal level of nobility and by his perceived reduction of its powers, and especially at the hated institution of the *Quattuorviri Consulares*, refused to deify the deceased princeps. Antoninus responded by refusing to undertake the government on any other basis and this, together with his compromise agreement to disband the *Quattuorviri Consulares*, induced the senate to agree to ratify Hadrian's acts and deify him. Antoninus's devotion to Hadrian's memory is usually cited as the reason for his being officially styled Pius. But his twenty-three-year reign, one unequaled in Roman history for its peace and prosperity, showed such devotion to the wellbeing of his subjects that the title would have been deserved in any case. In everything Antoninus did, modesty was his watchword—which is why his reign is so easily overlooked.

Antoninus continued Hadrian's pacific policy and no wars were undertaken, although there was some activity to prevent barbarian incursions along the lower Danube and against the Alans on the edges of Armenia. The only real war, if it could be called such, was fought against the Brigantes of northern Britannia. In this one theater Antoninus did expand beyond Hadrian's frontiers, erecting a second wall well to the north of Hadrian's between the estuaries of the Clota and Bodotria (Clyde and Forth) along the line first fortified by Agricola in 84. There were conflicts with the Berbers in Africa and short-lived insurrections of Jews in Egypt, Armenia, and Palestine, but all were quickly suppressed.

The Model Ruler

A consequence of this peace was that trade and commerce flourished as never before. The high quality of municipal life, bolstered by continuing operation of the *alimenta*, is revealed in the numerous inscriptions throughout the provinces that record the generosity of wealthy patrons or the charitable activities of a growing citizen-middle class. Antoninus had no intention of draining this prosperity by making imperial visits that would burden the provinces with the expenses of housing his court. In contrast to his two predecessors, Antoninus remained at or around Rome where he could receive messages from all parts of the empire equally quickly, and only left the capital to visit his nearby estate at Lorium in the Campania.

He was equally restrained in respect of lavish building programs. He felt obliged to complete work begun by Hadrian, such as the mausoleum in which Hadrian's ashes were interred and the Hadrinaeum on the Campus Martius. He built the modest temple of Antoninus and Faustina (dedicated to his wife, who died in 141) and made repairs to Rome's ancient bridge, the Pons Sublicius, and to the Colosseum. Outside Rome, Antoninus repaired several roads and renovated ports in Alexandria, Caieta, and Terracina, built a bath complex at Ostia, an aqueduct at Antium, and small temples in his birthplace, Lanuvium.

Antoninus applied himself to the awakened interest in the law that Hadrian's Edict had promoted. He appointed to his *consilium* five expert jurists to advise him: Vinidius Verus, Salvius Valens, Volusius Mæcianus, Ulpius Marcellus, and Diavolenus. Under these men additions to the statute law introduced a new spirit of leniency and humanitarianism, which went so far as to legislate against abuse of slaves. In religion Antoninus lacked the skepticism of Hadrian, and was devoted to the traditions of virtuous Roman worship. This meant that he was remarkably tolerant, and during his reign the adoption of new eastern deities increased, although he maintained Trajan's ambivalent policies toward the Christians.

During his third consulship, in 139–40 (he was to hold it for the last time in 145), Antoninus issued a series of unusual coins in preparation for Rome's nine-hundredth birthday in 147. Their significance lies in the imagery, which depicts entirely new religious-mythological images intended to emphasize Rome's historical roots to the Trojans, Latins, and Sabines. The coins feature gods who had protected the city in the past and men such as Aeneas, Romulus,

Numa Pompilius, and Augustus. At the same time the issue indicated Antoninus as the logical successor to these great historical Roman figures.

In preparation for the succession, Antoninus's daughter Faustina the Younger married Marcus Aurelius in 145 and she soon became Augusta in place of her deceased mother. Marcus Aurelius was associated in the imperial powers, and he and Lucius Verus were both consuls on several occasions in preparation for their joint-accession. Antoninus Pius died at the age of seventy-four on March 7, 161 at his beloved Lorum. So the story goes, he passed away peacefully after giving his praetorian prefect the password for the day, "equanimity." It summed up his reign. "Probity" would have been equally appropriate; he left his adopted sons a reported surplus in the *fiscus* of 675 million *sesterces*. In many histories Antoninus Pius merits only a small mention, perhaps because no great matters of import occurred in his long reign and because extravagance, cruelty, and madness are more attractive in retrospect than modest but loving care of government. In his *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius wrote of his adoptive father:

Think of his constancy in every act rationally undertaken, his invariable equability, his piety, his serenity of countenance, his sweetness of disposition, his contempt for the bubble of fame, and his zeal for getting a true grasp of affairs.

Marcus Aurelius

Marcus Annius Verus / Imperator Caesar Marcus Aurelius Antoninus
Augustus

[Caesar 139; co-Augustus March 7, 161 to 169; sole to March 17, 180]

Lucius Verus

Lucius Ceionius Commodus / Imperator Caesar Lucius Aurelius Verus
Augustus

[ruled Augustus March 7, 161 to January-February 169]

Marcus Annius Verus was born at Rome on April 26, 121 into a distinguished family originally from Ucubi, near Corduba, Baetica. His father was Annius Verus, his mother Domitia Lucilla. In the year of his birth, his grandfather, also Marcus Annius Verus, held his second consulship. He held a third in 126 and also served Hadrian as urban prefect. Marcus was a serious youngster who enjoyed intellectual pursuits and embraced the teachings of rhetoric and philosophy. After his father's death, when Marcus was probably only three years old, the emperor Hadrian took an interest in him, and was said to have punned on his name Verus, calling the boy "Verissimus" (most truthful). In 136 Hadrian betrothed him to Ceionia Fabia, daughter of Lucius Aelius, who was Hadrian's designated successor until his death on the first day of 138.

Like his older sister Fabia, Lucius Ceionius Commodus was also born at Rome, on December 15, 130. In making his succession plans, Hadrian betrothed the young boy to Annia Galeria Faustina (the Younger), daughter of the newly adopted Antoninus Pius, thus cementing a complex interdependent web of marriages to underpin the strength of the principate into the future. At the adoption ceremony held on February 25, 138 Marcus was one month off his seventeenth birthday and his adoptive brother Lucius was seven. Now a part of the family of Antoninus, Marcus took the names of Marcus Aelius Aurelius Verus, but was usually known as Marcus Aurelius Caesar. The younger heir-apparent became Lucius Aelius Aurelius Commodus, but on his final accession the Commodus was dropped and replaced by Verus to emphasize his relationship to his adoptive brother Marcus.

Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus enjoyed a similar education at different times, and sometimes shared the same teachers. Marcus continued studying philosophy and rhetoric with the orator Marcus Cornelius Fronto (c.95–c.160), who also instructed Lucius. Marcus

counted among his acquaintances distinguished thinkers, such as Herodes Atticus (c.95–177) and Aelius Aristides (117–c.181), but the major influence on his thinking was the stoic philosopher Epictetus, who had died shortly before Marcus's birth. The role of the stoic teacher was to encourage in his students a virtuous life of reason according to nature. Our knowledge of Epictetus's philosophy comes to us through two works composed by his student Arrian, the *Discourses* and the *Handbook*. And we know from his own writing in *Meditations* that Marcus read these books, which he borrowed from another teacher called Junius Rusticus.

Soon after his accession to the principate Antoninus Pius altered the provisions of Hadrian's succession plan by breaking off Marcus's earlier betrothal to Lucius's sister Ceionia Fabia, engaging him instead to his own daughter Faustina the Younger. This, of course, meant breaking off Lucius's earlier engagement to Faustina, and the implied greater favor shown Marcus would overshadow their relationship in the future. While Marcus Aurelius continued to live by and espouse stoicism, Lucius Verus was altogether a more lightweight figure. Marcus rose steadily through the *cursus honorum*, combining magistracies with priesthoods, and holding consulships in 140 when he was only nineteen and 145, the year he married Faustina. He received the *tribunicia potestas* in 147, and perhaps also the *imperium proconsulare*. Being the younger by nine years, Lucius was treated in an inferior manner. This was expressed through various signs, for instance when Marcus was permitted to ride beside Antoninus, Lucius had to ride behind with the praetorian prefect. However, he served as quaestor in 153, and became consul in 154 when he was aged twenty-four without ever having been a praetor. In 161 Marcus and Lucius were the consuls, the third time for forty-year-old Marcus. It was the year that Antoninus died.

[15: Link to: Marcus Aurelius & Lucius Verus](#)

[Family Tree: Nervo-Trajanic and Antonines](#)

Rome's First Dyarchy

There was no opposition to Marcus's elevation—he had been ruling jointly with Antoninus for the last years of the reign. He immediately chose Lucius to be his co-princeps, as Hadrian had planned, and betrothed him to his daughter Annia Aurelia Galeria Lucilla. For the first time the empire was ruled jointly by two constitutionally elected emperors—a dyarchy. From the beginning of the year they were joint-consuls and held office for the entire year. Being the younger (adoptive) brother, younger partner, and son-in-law to Marcus Aurelius could not have been an easy position in life for Lucius. And there seems to have been an understanding that, while theoretically equal, Marcus was actually the senior partner. This was probably acceptable to Lucius, who seems to have been happier in the less responsible position. While Marcus was the sober, thoughtful philosopher, handsome Lucius was a vain man who highlighted his blond hair with gold dust. Early in 162 Lucius set out for Syria, where he became involved with a beautiful woman from Smyrna called Panthea. When tales of this affair reached Marcus, he advanced his daughter's wedding date, and dispatched Lucilla from Brundisium to meet Lucius at Ephesus in the province of Asia, where the two were promptly married.

There was a very real reason for Lucius Verus being in the eastern provinces. The Parthian empire had recovered from Trajan's invasion of 115, and tension had returned to the region of the upper Euphrates and Tigris as bickering over who should control the king of Armenia had intensified during Antoninus's reign. The death of the emperor encouraged King Vologeses III to depose the Roman client king and place his own puppet on Armenia's throne. Roman forces sent to oppose him suffered severe setbacks. Marcus Aurelius argued that an imperial presence would underscore the seriousness of the empire's response and Lucius consented to go.

To this point, owing to the peacefulness of Antoninus's principate, neither Marcus nor Lucius had gained much military experience. As events transpired, this proved to be no drawback to the older co-Augustus, but it was a handicap for Lucius. On the advice of his *consilium*, Marcus made Lucius take the best *legati legionis* available, including the notable strategist Gaius Avidius Cassius (c.130–175), and it was Cassius more than Lucius who prosecuted a successful campaign in 163–66. As Trajan had done, Cassius stormed and destroyed most of Parthia's major cities and strongholds, including

Seleucia and the capital Ctesiphon. Within four years Parthia capitulated, Armenia was reoccupied, Mesopotamia annexed to the empire again, and a joint-triumph of the Augusti celebrated in October 166, during which the two young sons of Marcus, Commodus and Verus, aged five and three, were named as Caesars.

Every indication suggests that from this point on the joint-principate would have been as peaceful and ordered as that of Antoninus Pius, but storm clouds were gathering. Beyond the Danube and upper Rhine, German tribes, increasingly compacted against the frontier by the pressure of other tribes in central and eastern Transrhenane Germany, were greedily eyeing Roman territory. Ironically, for the pacifist philosopher-emperor, the last fourteen years of Marcus Aurelius's reign were to be entirely devoted to deflecting a ruinous German invasion—the first of a long series of debilitating wars that would eventually bring the empire to its knees. But before these dire events transpired, rifts in the relationship of the two Augusti were becoming apparent.

Having enjoyed a time of self-indulgent pleasure while in the East, Lucius continued this lifestyle in Rome. He kept an entourage of actors and musicians about him and built a tavern in his house where guests gambled after dinner parties, drinking until they fell into stuporous sleep. He visited taverns and brothels dressed as a commoner, often partaking in drunken brawls, apparently unrecognized. Lucius was passionate about chariot racing, and buried Voluver, his favorite horse, on the Vatican hill. Marcus Aurelius disapproved of Lucius's spendthrift ways in what comes across as a brotherly indulgent manner. Marcus was once invited by Lucius to spend a two-week holiday in his ostentatious villa on the Via Clodia, north of Rome. While Marcus worked on affairs of state for the entire visit, Lucius and his companions spent the days and nights in revelry.

A familiar proviso has to be made here. The ancient histories recognize Marcus Aurelius as one the great Roman emperors; by contrast his "sidekick" must be belittled. We should not doubt, though, that there were tensions in the dyarchy. After his return from Syria, Lucius showed far less deference to his adoptive brother, whose conscientiousness he found stuffy, and serious strife between the Augusti probably lay in the near future. Fate, however, decided things differently.

The joint-triumph of 166 was overshadowed. With the return of the legions from the east came a devastating epidemic—possibly

smallpox, perhaps typhus—which took a terrible toll. The plague wiped out whole regions of the empire, leaving some provinces, especially in Illyricum, so depopulated that future emperors would struggle to find methods of repopulation. The last years of the decade were dominated by efforts to overcome the plague and provide relief for the victims.

The Great Barbarian War

But there was to be no relief from the menace in the north that heralded the permanent transformation of the Roman world. The German tribes bordering the upper Rhine and the length of the Danube had been rubbing shoulders with Roman civilization for more than a century. In time, their semi-nomadic and primitive agrarian existence had, by Roman example, become more urbanized. Two tribes in particular, the Quadi and the Marcomanni, both ruthlessly suppressed first by Domitian and then Trajan, were determined to move into the richer territories that lay within the Roman borders. In 166–67, the barbarians began to pour across the Danube into Raetia, Noricum, Pannonia, and through Dacia into Moesia. This was nothing like the problems encountered in the earlier years of the principate: the fighting was more serious than anything the Roman army had ever experienced. One force of Germans even crossed the Julian Alps into Italy, laying waste *municipia* and cities in the Po valley and laying siege to Aquileia at the head of the Adriatic.

Incapacitated by rampant illness, it took the under-strength Roman army time to regain control of the military situation. But to a great extent it was achieved, thanks to the efforts of capable commanders: Tiberius Claudius Pompeianus in Pannonia Inferior, Publius Helvius Pertinax in Raetia, and Marcus Claudius Fronto in Moesia Superior. Having been delayed in Rome by the plague crisis, the two Augusti only departed for Aquileia at the start of 168. However, discouraged by the initial success of Pertinax to their north in Raetia, the barbarians surrounding Aquileia withdrew and asked for a truce as soon as the forces of Marcus and Lucius arrived in the region. With the situation apparently under control, Lucius pressed Marcus for a return to Rome, and it was as they were traveling south in the spring of 169 that Lucius suddenly became ill, near Altinum (Altino). Three days later, aged thirty-eight, Lucius Verus lay dead. Marcus brought his brother's body to Rome, oversaw the funeral, and provided support for the deceased emperor's family and freedmen. Imperator Lucius Verus was later deified as *divus verus*.

Marcus Aurelius remained in Rome until the fall of 169, when a fresh invasion of Germans necessitated his presence at the frontier. The Jazyges, having been thwarted in Pannonia, turned their attention toward Dacia and seized the valuable gold mines at Alburnum. Marcus added Dacia to Fronto's command and reinforced the province with legion V Macedonica, but the campaign was unsuccessful in evicting

the barbarians, and Fronto was killed in battle. Marcus decided to take command himself. Before departing from Rome he married his daughter Lucilla, Lucius Verus's widow, to Tiberius Claudius Pompeianus and left him in charge of Rome. Unwilling to raise further taxes to finance the empire's defense, Marcus auctioned all the imperial valuables, even his wife's silk dresses, and then set out to confront the renewed German threat. However, fresh attacks by the Marcomanni diverted the emperor from immediately relieving Dacia.

His strategy centered on defeating each tribal incursion in detail to maximize the Roman army's superior tactics and discipline, while mitigating its weakness in numbers. In the initial counterattacks even slaves were drafted to bolster the manpower impaired by continuing plague losses. However, he also demonstrated political acumen in allowing large numbers of tribesmen into the empire as settlers and auxiliary soldiers. Augustus and Nero had done this before, but Marcus Aurelius was more systematic, and tied the settlers to their land by law.

In this way he hoped to alleviate some of the pressure on the borders as well as repopulating some parts of Illyricum. To a degree the strategy was successful. Based at Carnuntum (Petronell, Austria), he won a victory over the Marcomanni in late 171 and over their neighbors the Quadi in 174, before transferring to Sirmium (Mitrovica) from where, in the following year, he inflicted a defeat on the Jazyges—a proper revenge for their killing of Fronto in 169.

Marcus soon emerged as a second Trajan; he had already raised two new legions, II Italica and III Italica for the defense of northern Italy and the Alps, now he constructed many new camps, and re-established the frontier fortifications. He even contemplated the annexation of Marcomannia (Bohemia) and Sarmatia, to eliminate the headwaters of the Elbe and the Hungarian plain as staging areas for invasion. Such a plan would have undoubtedly stretched Roman resources beyond any reasonable limit, although it could be argued that the occupation of Sarmatia would have straightened out and shortened the frontier there, as had the annexation of the Agri Decumates under Domitian. But Marcus never carried it out because his attention was suddenly diverted in 175 to Syria, where the redoubtable warrior Gaius Avidius Cassius, who was now proconsul of Syria, claimed the throne for himself. Gossip alleged he had conspired with Marcus's wife, but Cassius may have been reacting to inaccurate news of the emperor's death.

Marcus's response was quick and decisive. In order to deal with the Syrian mutiny, Marcus Aurelius entered into a truce with the Germans. In return for the restitution of the many Roman citizens taken captive and in agreeing to a neutral zone five miles deep on the left bank of the Danube, the Marcomanni and Jazyges were given strictly defined rights of trading with the empire. Additionally, the Jazyges were granted a right of way through Dacia to their relations the Roxolani. Other tribes were allowed to settle in the plague-depopulated areas of Germania, Pannonia, Moesia, and Dacia in return for service in the Roman frontier garrisons. Germans of fighting age were enlisted as Roman mercenaries; both of these precedents set a pattern subsequent emperors would follow, and so began the transformation of the ethnic character that would one day leave control of the Roman empire in the hands of Transrhenane Teutonic warlords.

Leaving the northern wars in the hands of his legates, he left for Syria. But before he arrived soldiers loyal to the emperor had already killed Cassius. Marcus then spent time settling eastern affairs and visiting several of the provinces. He even indulged himself with an extended stay in Athens, the home of stoicism, where he was initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries, as Hadrian and Lucius Verus had been. However, the northern frontier war was still raging, and he returned there in 177, taking with him his sixteen-year-old son Commodus, who had been elevated to co-Augustus and given the *tribunicia potestas* and *imperium proconsulare*. By appointing a hereditary successor, Marcus Aurelius was breaking with the tradition established by Nerva to adopt as princeps-designate a man of merit from outside the immediate family. And as events turned out, it was a poor decision for the empire.

The Aurelian Administration

Marcus Aurelius continued the conscientious and careful administration of his four predecessors, and devoted much attention to judicial matters. He reinstated the *Quattuorviri Consulares* abandoned by Antoninus Pius on his accession to appease senatorial ire against Hadrian. For the most part his appointments to administrative positions were admirable. This is attested to by the fact that despite the ruinous war, Commodus was left with an adequately filled *fiscus* (although a somewhat Spartan palace since the war auction). Because he was unafraid of comparison with his subordinates, men of capability were allowed to control the Imperial Civil Service. The social mobility promoted by his predecessors continued, with provincial citizens advancing into the elite of the Roman aristocracy. Even those of plebeian birth could rise to eminence, as the case of Pertinax, defender of Raetia, indicates, a gifted general who would in turn get his chance at the principate.

Despite his adherence to stoic philosophy, Marcus Aurelius paid tribute to the ancient state cults, and showed great tolerance to all the new religions emanating from eastern mysteries. There was one significant exception to this universal toleration, the Christians. Although the sect was not persecuted through any official policy—indeed the Church's influence spread enormously during the second century—their usefulness as scapegoats for local crises made them subject to abuse. During the worst depredations of the plague in 167, sporadic acts of violence against Christians broke out in many parts of the empire. The worst took place at Lugdunum (Lyon), where the atrocities amounted to a pogrom. Tertullian later called Marcus Aurelius a “friend of Christianity,” and indeed he was not the cause of the persecution, but neither did he nor his officials do anything to stop what is the worst stain on his principate.

Marcus Aurelius's marriage to Faustina the Younger was not a happy one, although it endured for thirty years, during which time she bore him thirteen children. Several died in childhood, but of those who survived, the two with the most bearing on history were the daughter Annia Aurelia Galeria Lucilla, who first married Lucius Verus and then Pompeianus, and the son Commodus. Despite his august name, Tiberius Claudius Pompeianus was a Syrian of lowly equestrian birth. Only fourteen when she married Lucius in 164, Lucilla was still only nineteen at her second marriage and Pompeianus may have been over fifty. Both she and her mother Faustina found him socially

beneath their dignity. Marcus, however, had probably chosen Pompeianus, a loyal and valuable military officer, precisely because his social station foreclosed any ambitions of his own for the throne.

Faustina was accused of employing poison and of murdering people, as well as playing fast and loose with gladiators, sailors, and also men of rank, particularly Gaius Avidius Cassius, with whom, as we have seen, she was suspected of conspiring to bring Marcus down. And yet, as he had gently treated Lucius Verus, Marcus trusted Faustina and defended her reputation. We know that she accompanied him on several campaigns because she was styled *Mater Castrorum* (mother of the camps). She was certainly with him in camp at Halala in southern Cappadocia in the winter of 175 when she died in an accident. Marcus dedicated a shrine in the Forum Romanum to her memory and had tiny Halala raised to the status of a colony and renamed *Faustinopolis*.

Because of the plague and the German wars, Rome and the provinces hardly benefited at all from any building program under Marcus Aurelius. The best known monument stands in today's Piazza Colonna in Rome and is a sculpted column similar to Trajan's. The spiral relief depicts Marcus's campaigns of 172–75 against the Marcomanni. However, there are important differences between the two columns. Whereas the imagery on Trajan's is an aggrandizement of conquest, Marcus's shows the defense of an empire under increasing pressure from across the frontiers, a pattern that would dominate the next century. The quality of the carving on Marcus's column is also regarded as being inferior to the superb realization of Trajan's, but it points to a new development in Roman art, a move away from the Hellenistic style to something more recognizably "gothic." Many critics prefer the carvings on Marcus's column for their vigor. Begun in the last half of the decade, it was only completed in 193 by Septimius Severus. Another column, apparently undecorated, was raised in honor of Antoninus Pius on the Campus Martius. Three arches commemorating the joint-emperors' military achievements have been lost, although eight reliefs on the Arch of Constantine appear to have come from one of them, and three other reliefs displayed today in the Capitoline Museum came from another.

Given the extent of the frontier wars, it is hardly surprising that Marcus Aurelius figures little in monumental building, and we know him best from his writing. In his *Meditations* he used Greek to set down his innermost thoughts in a simple manner, as they occurred to

him and without literary artifice, and they are in extraordinary contrast to the continual slaughter in the muddy northern forests.

Everything harmonizes with me which is harmonious with you, O Universe. Nothing is too early for me nor too late, which is in due time for you. Everything is fruit to me which your seasons bring, O Nature; for you are all things, in you are all things, to you all things return.

On the nature of rule he wrote:

Take care that you are not made into a Caesar, that you are not dyed with this dye; for such things happen. Keep yourself simple, good, pure, serious, free from affectation, a friend of justice, a worshipper of the gods, kind, affectionate, strenuous in all proper acts...

“Dye” is a reference to the imperial purple, the most seductive trapping of imperial power, and these were words his son Commodus would have done well to heed.

The *Meditations* were written in breaks between the almost continual fighting on the frontier, probably at his alternate headquarters of Vindobona (Vienna) and Sirmium, and it was at the latter where he died of natural causes on March 17, 180 at the age of fifty-nine—the last emperor of the period now known as Pax Romana.

Commodus

Lucius Aelius Aurelius Commodus / Marcus Aurelius Commodus
Antoninus

[Caesar 166; co-Augustus 177 to March 17, 180; sole to December 3, 192]

On his father's death Commodus succeeded to all power without opposition, and became the first princeps since Domitian to succeed his natural father. History has little bad to say about Marcus Aurelius, "that philosophic monarch," as Gibbon called him, except that by elevating his son, he bequeathed Rome its worst emperor since Gaius Caligula, arguably one of the worst ever. And the end of his reign would lead inexorably through one unfortunate emperor to the most shameful episode in all of Rome's long history—an auction of the empire to the highest bidder.

Commodus, the first Roman princeps to be born to a ruling emperor, came into the world at Lanuvium, birthplace of Antoninus Pius, on August 31, 161. He was the tenth of Marcus Aurelius's thirteen children and a twin, although his twin brother died at the age of four. He was given the cognomen Commodus after Marcus Aurelius's co-emperor, Lucius Ceionius Commodus Verus. In his childhood Commodus was groomed to succeed his father, and was styled Caesar at the age of five. After the revolt of Avidius Cassius, Marcus conferred on him the imperial powers in 177 when he was sixteen and made him co-Augustus.

Busts of the adolescent Commodus reveal a pretty and delightfully innocent-looking boy. As a young man, he was handsome, with curly blond hair. But he allowed himself to be easily influenced by others, especially if they possessed a poor character, which seemed to appeal to him. This is not an unusual trait in the child of a virtuous man and he might have been expected to grow out of it, but evidence of his cruel streak and tendency to erratic and excessive behavior as he grew older worried many observers. It would not be unreasonable to suppose that the rebellion of Avidius Cassius in 175, when he mistakenly thought Marcus Aurelius had died, might well have been occasioned by a fear of the consequences if Commodus ever came to the throne. Indeed, his unfaithful mother Faustina, from whom Commodus took some of his bad character, was well versed in spotting a monster in the making, and may have inspired Cassius to act.

Although the eighteen-year-old emperor gave the army an

immediate promise to continue prosecuting the war against the Germans, Commodus had no intention of keeping it. Had he been another Hadrian, his policy of appeasement might have been viewed as a sanguine understanding that Roman soldiers had suffered enough, and that the empire's resources were stretched almost to breaking point. But it seemed that his real reason was to get back to the luxuries of Rome and indulge himself in his preferred pastime of partaking in gladiatorial combat. Commodus rapidly concluded treaties with the Quadi and Marcomanni, which the soldiers ever after viewed as a betrayal of his father's name. However, the treaties proved successful in pacifying the barbarians, and it obliged them to accept various conditions in return for allowing some further German settlement in those areas Marcus Aurelius had offered in 169–70.

Leaving behind sufficient garrisons to man the Illyrian frontier, Commodus returned to Rome on October 22, 180 in a triumphal procession, after which Marcus Aurelius's ashes were interred in Hadrian's mausoleum. The new emperor received a hero's welcome, and if any in the joyous crowd recognized the many similarities to this and the return of Gaius Caligula a hundred and forty years earlier, they were wise enough to keep their thoughts to themselves. Coins issued in 181 all display the youthful, triumphant warrior bringing the booty of victory to the citizens of Rome. As had many of his predecessors, Commodus distributed a *congiarium* to the mob, often with coins bearing the legend *Munificentia Augusta*, which suggests that this was part of a conscious policy of winning popularity. He had few financial concerns at first, since Marcus Aurelius had left the *fiscus* in a healthy state despite the war, but the tensions between the emperor and the senate probably date to his special taxation raised to fund the splendid games and the money gifts.

There is little further to recommend the relatively long and completely inglorious reign of Commodus. He built nothing of consequence and did not concern himself with the administration of the empire, preferring to leave that in the hands of a succession of praetorian prefects. The Antonines were traditionally associated with the cult of Hercules and, as statues of him attest, Commodus began to dress like the god, wearing lion skins and carrying the deity's famous club. This derangement was probably intended to strengthen his claim as the new founder of Rome, which he later renamed Colonia Commodiana—the Colony of Commodus. And it was not long before he insisted on being worshipped as Hercules. He changed the names of

the months to accord with all his titles: Lucius, Aelius, Aurelius, Commodus, Augustus, Hercules, Romanus, Exsuperatorius, Amazonius, Invictus, Felix, Pius. If a further sign of his madness were required, his continual appearances in the arena dressed as a gladiator supplied it. We are told that not only would Commodus fight and defeat the most skilled gladiators, he would also test his talent by encountering the most ferocious of beasts. The sham must have been obvious; his human opponents were only supplied with wooden swords... and some limped, as did many of the drugged animals.

The first conspiracy against him was uncovered as early as 182, and those implicated included his older sister Lucilla and her cousin the ex-consul Marcus Ummidius Quadratus. Lucilla's second husband Tiberius Claudius Pompeianus may have been the plotter's choice for the throne, but if so, it is unlikely that the modest Pompeianus agreed with them. However, it was Pompeianus's nephew Quintianus who tried to stab Commodus, but was overpowered by praetorian guards before he could succeed. Quadratus and Quintianus were executed and Lucilla banished to Capri, where shortly after she too was put to death. One of the praetorian prefects, Tarrutenius Paternus, was also executed on suspicion of being involved in the plot. This left the remaining prefect, Tigidius Perennis, in sole charge of running the empire, the first man in possession of such power since Sejanus during the reign of Tiberius.

[16. Link to: Commodiana](#)

[Family Tree: Nervo-Trajanic and Antonines](#)

Lord of Misrule

While Commodus concerned himself with the complexities of running his palace harem, comprised we are told of three hundred each of young girls and boys, and organizing ever more bizarre gladiatorial games with himself as the Herculean star, Perennis attempted to handle the affairs of state. This he appears to have done with considerable ability, but without the protection of the indifferent princeps, his position was bound to cause envy. Perennis is known to have instigated the brutal crushing of an army mutiny in Britannia, and when a delegation of disgruntled soldiers arrived in Rome in 185 to complain of his conduct to Commodus, Perennis's enemies gathered. Beyond accusations of destabilizing the province, it was also pointed out to the emperor that his prefect had appointed one of his sons to govern militarily vital Pannonia, a move perceived as a threat to the divinity's all-too mortal life. Whether there really was a plot or not, Commodus had Perennis executed, along with his wife, sister, and his sons.

Into his office stepped the man who had engineered the executions, Commodus's chamberlain, a freedman by the name of Marcus Aurelius Cleander. By comparison, Perennis had been a paragon of Roman virtue. Cleander filled his own coffers by the sale of public offices, especially that of consul. In 190 he managed to sell as many as twenty-five consulships, making a complete mockery of what was left of constitutional government.

In the same year a serious grain shortage—probably engineered by the *praefectus annonae*, Papyrius Dionysius, to discomfort Cleander—led to street rioting. Cleander let loose the praetorian guards and hundreds of people were slaughtered. In revenge the mob caught Cleander and tore his body to bits. A string of short-lived prefects followed until Quintus Aemilius Laetus, praetorian prefect in 192, determined to put an end to the mad emperor, who had announced in November that he would celebrate the renaming of Rome and become consul in January 193.

Laetus, an *eques* from Hadrumetum (Sousse) in the province of Africa was careful in his choice of conspirators, but the senatorial order loathed Commodus, so it was not difficult to find support for the plan. Even within the palace precincts, courtiers terrified of the unhinged emperor were willing to join, among them the chamberlain Eclectus and the emperor's favorite concubine Marcia. Without fuss, supporters were placed into key positions around the empire.

Septimius Severus and Clodius Albinus, fellow African provincials of Laetus, were given the governorships of Pannonia Superior and Britannia respectively. Another ally, Pescennius Niger, was sent to take charge of Syria. And after some debate the future emperor was selected: the defender of Raetia and now *praefectus urbi*, Publius Helvius Pertinax.

The assassination called for Marcia to administer a fatal dose of poison on the evening of December 31, 192. This failed because Commodus, now thoroughly deranged at the age of thirty-one, became nauseous and vomited up his food and the toxic potion. But the conspirators had a reserve plan for such an eventuality. A courtier named Narcissus, who Commodus employed as a wrestling partner, overpowered and strangled the emperor in his bed on the same night. The body was later taken out, cremated, and the ashes ignominiously buried in a civic cemetery.

It seems inconceivable that the madness of Commodus should have been allowed to bring the Roman empire almost to its knees, but it is a reflection on the one hand of the weakness of a debilitated senate and the abhorrent behavior of the praetorian guards on the other. Pampered by the emperor, who invited gangs of the younger soldiers to his pansexual orgies and lavish feasts, and continually in receipt of extra donatives, the guard had descended into little better than enforcers for a regime of thuggery. The death of Commodus brought the Antonine dynasty to a close. It also spelled the end of the period of constitutional principates and heralded the long, weary fall of the Roman empire into despotic autocracy.

There is, however, a strange footnote to the end of Commodus. Pertinax, his successor, had his ashes exhumed and ceremoniously laid to rest in Hadrian's mausoleum alongside those of his father. Septimius Severus even went so far as to have Commodus deified in 197—although this was purely an act of political petulance against the senate done for reasons of his own that will become clear later.

EMPERORS OF THE CIVIL WAR

[AD 192–197]

Pertinax

Publius Helvius Pertinax

[Augustus January 1 to March 28, 193]

In many respects, the elevation of Pertinax resembles that of Nerva, who was also chosen by conspirators to replace an assassinated despot. Like Nerva, at sixty-six Pertinax was relatively old to become the emperor, and he too enjoyed a fine reputation among the senators for his commendable military service to the empire. He even revived the Republican title of *Princeps Senatus* (first man of the senate) with which to style himself, in deference to the aristocracy. These seemed to be good omens to inaugurate another reign like that of Nerva.

Pertinax was born on August 1, 126 into the humble household of his freedman father Helvius Successus, who had prospered in the clothing trade. The family lived in the Ligurian town of Alba Pompeia (Alba), some thirty-five miles southeast of Augusta Taurinorum (Turin), in the northwest of Italy. The young Pertinax was sent to Rome to study with the grammarian Sulpicius Apollinaris and in turn became a teacher of grammar. At some point in his mid-thirties, Pertinax looked for a more financially rewarding career in the army and became a *tribunus militum* of a Gallic detachment in Syria. Promotion took him to Britannia, as a tribune of legion VI Victrix at Eburacum (York). He distinguished himself during the Parthian war of 163–66 and again against the German invasions of Raetia in 166–68, and rose quickly in the military, and then in government service.

During the German wars he enjoyed the patronage of Tiberius Claudius Pompeianus, who had married Marcus Aurelius's daughter Lucilla. Pertinax married into the aristocracy, gaining the daughter of the ex-consul Flavius Sulpicianus. In the early 170s Pertinax was adlected into the senate. In 175 he was named a suffect consul as colleague to the man who would succeed him as emperor, Didius Julianus. Pertinax was governor variously of Moesia Superior and Inferior, Dacia, Syria, and Africa, before returning to Rome as urban prefect in 189. The ancient histories disagree slightly on this itinerary, because it seems that for a short period in 185 he may have been sent to Britannia to quell the army mutiny, the suppression of which was

blamed on the praetorian prefect Tigridius Perennis, and which brought him down.

At dawn on the first of January 193 Laetus awakened Pertinax and informed him that Commodus was dead. He was then escorted to the *Castra Praetoria*, where Laetus persuaded the reluctant soldiers to recognize their new emperor with a promised donative of twelve thousand *sesterces* for each man. This done, Pertinax went to the Temple of Concord where the senate was sitting and, to a standing ovation—occasioned by the sheer relief that Commodus had gone—was bestowed with the imperial powers and prerogatives. Commodus was declared *damnatio memoriae*, his memory damned.

Pertinax immediately set about restoring the government shattered by Commodus. He reduced the exorbitant taxes that had funded Commodus's extravagant public games and re-implemented the *alimenta*, as well as reviving a law that aided owners of uncultivated land to put it back into production. The senate was allowed to participate fully again in political life, and it began to seem as though the era of Nerva really had returned. But it was all an illusion.

An exacting disciplinarian and inflexible once he had decided on a course of action, Pertinax knew he had to deal firmly with the praetorian guard, which had become defiant of the senate and, under Commodus, almost unmanageable. There is also no denying that they were greedy, but Pertinax's refusal to pay them the substantial donative promised by Laetus on his accession was an unwise stand to take. His solid argument that stringent economies were necessary in order to return some liquidity to the *fiscus* failed to impress the praetorians. Violence threatened to such a degree that the emperor was forced to back down and pay the donative, which he raised by selling off Commodus's property, including the concubines and youths Commodus had kept for his sexual pleasures. The gift silenced the rumblings, but only for a short time, for when the emperor pressed on with revisions of praetorian privileges, anger boiled over.

Pertinax was in Ostia overseeing the regulation of the interrupted grain supply when news reached him that a praetorian coup was planned to place the consul Sosius Falco on the throne. Pertinax hurriedly rode back to the city to defuse the situation. By now even Laetus was unable to hold back the soldiers under his command, and a few days later on March 28, 193 a gang of praetorians entered the palace. With a bravado typical of him, Pertinax confronted the troops and was killed. His reign had lasted just eighty-seven days. In

jubilation, the men decapitated the body and stuck the emperor's head on a lance to parade it through the city to their camp, while a sorrowing mob watched on, fearing for the future.

Considering his disgraceful actions shortly after the murder of Pertinax, it is sobering to note that Didius Julianus was the grandson on his mother's side of the celebrated jurist Salvius Julianus, who had undertaken the codification of the law for Hadrian. Nominally emperor for just over two months, the authority of his principate hardly extended beyond Rome, let alone to Italy or the empire. Didius Julianus would gain historical notoriety only for the means by which he became princeps: by placing the highest bid in an auction of the empire.

Dates given for his birth vary: Cassius Dio opts for January 30, 133, the *Historiae Augustae* prefers the less likely February 2, 137. Since it is going to crop up as a source in future pages, it is worth a short digression to describe the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*. It was probably written in the late fourth century AD. It purports to be a compilation made by six different historians, but stylistically appears to be the work of one hand and, while entertaining, is considered to be unreliable except where its claims coincide with their sources.

Returning to Didius Julianus, whatever date he was actually born, there is agreement that his birthplace was Mediolanum (Milan). Didius Julianus was typical of the provincial elite who had enjoyed greater social status during the reigns of Trajan, Hadrian, and the Antonines. His parents' was a multicultural marriage: his father Quintus Petronius Didius Julianus was of a provincial Mediolanum family, while his mother, Aemilia Clara, originally came from Hadrumetum (Sousse) in Africa. The maternal connection to his celebrated grandfather meant that Didius Julianus was educated in the household of Domitia Lucilla, mother of the emperor Marcus Aurelius, and enjoyed both her patronage and that of her son.

By the time of his accession, he could look back on a busy and varied military and political career. He was made an aedile in 160 and praetor in 163 and then held secretarial positions to the governors of Asia and later Africa in c.168–69. In 170–71 he was *legatus legionis* of XXII Primigenia stationed on the Rhine at Moguntiacum (Mainz). His military highlight came in 173 in Belgica, where he had been appointed governor, when the Germanic Chauci tribe invaded. Inhabitants of the Waddenzee in modern Holland, they attacked south into the heart of what today is northern Flanders, causing widespread

destruction. Didius Julianus recruited local troops and defeated the invaders. Since the construction of fortifications along the *Fretum Gallicum* (Dover Strait) that came to be known as the *Litus Saxonicum* (Saxon Coast) date from this period, it is likely that Didius Julianus was the man who advised Marcus Aurelius to construct them.

He became a suffect consul in 175 at the traditional minimum age of forty-two, which was quite late in life for this period, with Pertinax as his colleague. This was the mid-period of the war against the Marcomanni, so Pertinax was almost certainly active in Illyricum, but Didius Julianus's movements are unclear and he may have remained in Rome, taking care of affairs while Marcus Aurelius went to Syria as a result of Avidius Cassius's revolt. In 176 he was appointed to the governorship of Dalmatia, an important food-growing region vital to the provisioning of frontier armies. In 180 he moved back to the Rhine as governor of Germania Inferior in command of I Minervia in Bonna (Bonn) and XXX Ulpia Victrix in Colonia Ulpia Traiana (Xanten).

So much for what appears to be an illustrious career, and yet a theme runs through it. In almost all cases Didius Julianus was placed in positions of control where nothing of vital military importance was occurring. The real wars were on the eastern frontier and along the Danube, not in Africa, Gaul, or the lower Rhine frontier. Was his military capability in doubt? And the prestige he acquired from his offices did not translate into respect from his fellow senators. He had the reputation of a sensualist and spendthrift. This was not the stuff of leadership; and events would reveal him an opportunist.

Under Commodus he was recalled to Rome, the new emperor suspicious of any well-known figure being near a provincial army. Some five years later he was sent to govern Bithynia and in 189 succeeded Pertinax as proconsul of Africa. It is not certain exactly when he returned to Rome, but Pertinax probably recalled him after the death of Commodus. He was certainly in the city in time to witness the effects of the stringent financial policy resulting in Pertinax's untimely death. With no clear succession the man theoretically in charge during an interregnum was the urban prefect, Flavius Sulpicianus, who happened to be Pertinax's father-in-law. But knowing he was nothing without praetorian support, Sulpicianus hurried to the *Castra Praetoria*. There, he promised the soldiers—who had barricaded themselves in fear of mob revenge for the murder of Pertinax—a substantial donative if they would proclaim him emperor.

On hearing that the praetorians were unconvinced of Sulpicianus, Didius Julianus seized his opportunity. Almost tripping over his toga with indecent haste he rushed to the camp and claimed that, as close career colleagues, he was Pertinax's choice of successor—and the ignoble auction began with an improved offer over his rival's. Sulpicianus responded with a still-better donative. The praetorians almost certainly preferred Julianus over Sulpicianus, but were determined to see how much they could get, and egged on the two men. Each contender continued to up his bid until Sulpicianus reached the figure of twenty thousand *sesterces* per man, equivalent to about eight years' pay. Didius Julianus went for broke and offered twenty-five thousand. At this last bid, the praetorians agreed and the Roman empire was sold. Didius Julianus was then allowed through the gates into the camp, where the soldiers invested him with the purple. For Julianus, the shameful deal sealed his bitter end.

At least Pertinax had attempted to restore order and good government to Rome, but his successor had no such opportunity. His only effective act was to put to death the praetorian's emperor-making prefect, Laetus. Cravenly, the senate confirmed his elevation, but mob violence erupted, with the crowd screaming for Pescennius Niger, governor of Syria, to return to Rome as their ruler. All classes of the city were fed up with the situation and each faction wanted its own strongman to come to the rescue.

Niger was not the only candidate. In Britannia there was Clodius Albinus, and also Septimius Severus in Pannonia Superior. Of the three, Severus was nearest to Rome and in command of two highly trained legions, I Adiutrix and X Gemina, with a call on the two stationed in Pannonia Inferior, XIV Gemina and II Adiutrix. Only twelve days after Pertinax's death, the Pannonian troops proclaimed Septimius Severus at Carnuntum on April 9, 193. Didius Julianus attempted to negotiate as Severus marched unopposed into Italy, but his envoys kept defecting to Severus. At the end of May Severus reached Interamna (Terni), fifty miles north of Rome. On the last day of May the praetorian guard switched allegiance. The senate promptly revoked Didius Julianus's imperial powers and recognized Severus as emperor. Didius Julianus was put to death the following day. His reign had lasted for sixty-six days.

Severus entered Rome on June 9, 193. He considered his predecessor little more than a usurper who had taken advantage of the situation after the murder of Pertinax. Nevertheless, he refused to

countenance any atrocities to the body of Didius Julianus, which was interred by his wife Manlia Scantilla and his daughter Didia Clara near the fifth milestone on the Via Labicana. The civil war, however, was not over. A few weeks prior to these events in Rome Clodius Albinus had assumed the imperial purple in Britannia, and so had Pescennius Niger in Syria. Neither made an immediate move and there was stasis as each waited to see whether Didius Julianus or Septimius Severus would be victorious.

Pescennius Niger
Gaius Pescennius Niger Justus
[Claimant April 193 to fall 194]

Pescennius Niger's early life and career are obscure. He was born into a central Italian equestrian family at some point between 135 and 140, but only held the rank of centurion in his early military career and became a *primus pilus* (senior centurion, *lit.* "first file") in Egypt. Commodus adlected him into the rank of praetorian senators, and he campaigned successfully alongside Clodius Albinus against the Sarmatae in Dacia in 183. His reward for good service was a suffect consulship, probably in the late 180s, and again in 190. In the following year he was sent to govern Syria. While this might have been a further sign of favor from Commodus, all the evidence points to Niger having some involvement in the plot to assassinate the emperor. If so, then the appointment really came from Laetus, who needed reliable and capable allies in key positions before putting Pertinax on the throne. Some sources claim that Niger owed his appointment to Narcissus, the athlete who strangled Commodus.

Pescennius Niger is described as being tall although quite fat, and we are told that if the wind was in the right direction his troops could hear his booming voice from a mile away. His military reputation and demands for stern discipline earned him the respect of his men. The only other personal details surviving in the ancient histories are that he was over-fond of wine and that he only ever had sex with children.

At about the same time in April the news of Pertinax's murder reached Pannonia, it came to Pescennius Niger in Antioch. His faction in Rome was probably the largest of the three contenders, and he would have heard in the same dispatch that rioters in the Circus Maximus had shouted for him to seize the throne. Niger enjoyed several advantages: the equestrian governor of Egypt approved of his cause; Asellius Aemilianus the governor of Asia was a close ally; and crucially Byzantium offered him open gates, giving the Nigerians a toehold on the European coast. Within days all nine of the eastern legions proclaimed him emperor. On paper this gave him the strongest force of all: XII Fulminata and XV Apollinaris in Cappadocia; his own III Gallica, IV Scythia, and XVI Flavia in Syria; VI Ferrata and X Fretensis in Palestine; II Traiana in Egypt, and III Cyrenaica in Arabia. Further, he was encouraged in his cause by a message from Vologeses V, king of Parthia, offering his (doubtless dubious) support; the Parthians, again, were seeking an advantage.

Septimius Severus, however, had geography on his side, and was in a position to reach Rome long before Niger could mobilize his forces. Unwilling to fight a war on two fronts, Severus offered the other rival, Clodius Albinus in Britannia, the title of Caesar, which effectively pronounced him heir to the throne. Having conciliated the potential western threat, Severus set out to deal with the more dangerous contender to his east. Niger's strategy was to occupy Byzantium and then advance to Perinthus, which straddled the two main roads from Europe to Asia. Severus, still in Italy preparing his army, appointed his brother, Publius Septimius Geta, governor of Dacia, and ordered his legate Lucius Fabius Cilo to proceed to Perinthus to counter Niger. Cilo drew detachments from the Moesian legions and reached Perinthus early in May 193. After a skirmish in the vicinity, Cilo was successful in denying Niger entry to Perinthus, who was obliged to fall back on Byzantium. A siege of the city began at the start of June, capably managed by Marius Maximus, *legatus legionis* of I Italica.

Severus joined his advance units at Perinthus toward the end of the summer. With besieged Byzantium guarding the main crossing into Asia, Severus placed the bulk of his army in the hands of his general Claudius Candidus, with instructions to cross the Hellespont at Callipolis (Gallipoli) and then advance to Cyzicus. The first battle took place there in December 193 or early January 194, where the Severan forces proved superior to those under the command of the Asian governor Aemilianus. With Cyzicus lost and Severan forces on the Asian coast, Byzantium was vulnerable and no longer a tenable stronghold. Niger began a retreat to Nicaea, while Severus slipped behind him to occupy Nicomedia, effectively blocking the way back to Byzantium. On the plain between Nicaea and Cius the Severan forces inflicted a severe defeat on Niger's army. Only the fall of night saved the Nigerian forces from utter destruction. In disarray, the remnant was routed across the Taurus mountains to Antioch. Here, Niger learned that legion II Traiana had defected to Severus and turned Egypt over to the Severan cause, and on February 13, 194 Severus's victory was celebrated in a festival held at Arsinoe. The other eastern provincial governors also switched their loyalty to Severus, and Niger faced revolts even in Syria.

As the Severans pushed through the mountain barrier to threaten Antioch, Niger marched out with the Syrian army to meet them at Issus, where Alexander the Great had defeated the Persian army of Darius II in 333 BC. In that famous battle, it was the forces of the West

that overcame those of the East, and so it was again in April 194. Abandoned by all but his most loyal troops, Niger hastened to Antioch and ordered the city's evacuation before fleeing to Parthia. He never got there: short of reaching the Euphrates in mid-194 he was captured and killed. After hacking off his head, it was parceled up and carried to Severus.

Pescennius Niger's remit ran wide with the Roman mob, but he lacked real support among the senatorial order. On paper he possessed the stronger military force, but where Severus was able to concentrate his legions quickly, Niger's were scattered across a vast area and so he was unable to press home his advantage. In 69 Vespasian had been able to sever the Egyptian grain supply to Rome and so bring pressure to bear on Vitellius, but for Niger this tactic vanished with the defection of II Traiana. The towns that had supported Niger were punished with swingeing fines, and the center of Antioch was razed and the city reduced to the status of a village. Severus divided Syria into two provinces, Syria Coele (with the attachment of Comagene) and Phoenicia. His purpose was to prevent any future eastern governor gaining military power as great as Niger's. Having personally confiscated the estates of Niger's adherents, Septimius Severus made himself extremely wealthy, a useful adjunct to his victory.

It seemed likely that at this point the emperor would add to his glories by a conquest of the tottering Parthian empire of Vologeses, who after all had sided with Niger. Syria was crowded with legions, not only the vanquished eastern troops but also Severus's European army. That an invasion never took place is down to two obstacles in Severus's path: the siege of obstinate Byzantium still dragged on to his rear, but more importantly he had detected treasonable correspondence between his colleague Clodius Albinus and the senate in Rome. Parthia would have to wait. Septimius Severus had his troops declare Clodius Albinus a public enemy and prepared to evacuate the European legions from Syria to Viminacium (Kostolac) on the Danube in preparation for a war in the west.

17. [Link to: Claimants in Conflict](#)

Clodius Albinus

Decimus Clodius (Septimius) Albinus

[claimant/co-Augustus April 193 to February 19, 197]

Geography played a part in Clodius Albinus surviving in his “reign” longer than Pertinax, Didius Julianus, and Pescennius Niger. Governor of Britannia at the time of Commodus’s death, it would always take him a longer time to gather sufficient forces to back his claim to the principate. Politics, too, contributed to his relative longevity in the deal he struck with Septimius Severus to share power.

In many respects, of all the contenders of the period of civil war, Albinus had the most prestigious pedigree. He was an ancestor of a branch of one of Rome’s most ancient families. By virtue of arriving in Rome a little earlier, the Claudians became patrician, while their tardier cousins the Clodians missed the opportunity to reach the noblest level of the ancient aristocracy and only achieved plebeian rank. They were, however, quick to seize aristocratic status when wealthy plebeians were permitted to become senatorial and consular in the mid-fourth century BC. Albinus was born into a wealthy family of Hadrumetum in the province of Africa. His birth date is unknown, but in accordance with his traditional progress up the *cursus honorum*, it has to have lain between 140 and 150. Herodian places the date at the end of this range on the grounds that his aristocratic blood lent him prestige among the senatorial order and so speeded his progress. Of his character, we also know little beyond snippets that suggest he enjoyed writing erotic stories, was a womanizer, a stern disciplinarian, and ruthless commander. The Clodians had a long reputation for harshness, but if he was cruel he was far less so than his principal rival, Septimius Severus.

After a successful early military career, Clodius Albinus entered the senate during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. Later, while governing Bithynia in 175, Albinus remained loyal to the emperor when the revolt of Avidius Cassius took place in Syria. In common with his rivals for the throne, he distinguished himself in the Illyrian campaigns early in Commodus’s reign and served as a suffect consul at some point in the mid-180s. In 189 he was made governor of Germania Inferior, and at the instigation of fellow-Hadrumetan, the praetorian prefect Laetus—who was conspiring to assassinate Commodus—Albinus went to govern Britannia in mid-192. We must assume that he connived at the emperor’s removal and was pleased at the plot’s success and the accession of Pertinax, and therefore equally

distressed at his murder in March 193. With his senatorial experience and assured of much support from Rome's nobility, Albinus began preparing his own claim on the throne.

His three legions, II Augusta, VI Victrix, and XX Valeria Victrix, proclaimed him emperor in April 193, and it appears that he received the support of VII Gemina in Hispania Tarraconensis and III Augusta in Africa. It is improbable that the death of Pertinax was the cause of this move, since his successor Didius Julianus was a fellow Hadrumetan on his mother's side and may have met with Albinus's cautious approval. The more likely motive is a refusal to allow Severus—another African, but from Leptis Magna—to seize the throne from Didius Julianus. But quicker off the mark, Severus entered Rome without a fight in June. However, even before leaving Pannonia for Italy, envoys from Severus arrived in Britannia with his offer to adopt Albinus by making him Caesar to Severus's Augustus, in preference to his own two young sons. We know that Albinus accepted the deal because coins portraying him as *IMP.CÆSAR.D.CLODIVS.SEPTIMIUS.ALBINVS* were issued in Rome in 194, and he shared the ordinary consulship (in absentia) with Severus in the same year.

Whether Albinus trusted this arrangement to last is not known, but given the general situation prevailing and the Roman propensity for favoring family, he must have thought that he would remain a very junior partner at the least; in this he was proved correct. The adoption was merely a ruse to keep Albinus out of the way until Pescennius Niger had been defeated in Syria, for returning to Rome early in 195, Severus named his seven-year-old son Caracalla as Caesar and his heir. While this was a sound means of securing the succession, it was also intended as a calculated insult designed to draw Albinus away from the safety of island Britannia and force a battle where Severus thought he could win it: in Gaul.

Albinus took the bait and in 196 crossed the *Fretum Gallicum* with some forty thousand troops, and marched to Lugdunum (Lyons) to set up a headquarters there. The governor of Hispania Tarraconensis, Lucius Novius Rufus, confirmed his support, which guaranteed Albinus the use of Legion VII Gemina. He was facing an opponent who could draw on the overwhelming forces of the Illyrian legions, and—critically—the four German legions also declared for Severus (the eastern army was already involved in a war against the Parthians). This meant that early in his campaign Albinus was obliged to strike a

blow against those enemy forces closest to his lines of communication, I Minervia and XXX Ulpia commanded by the governor of Germania Inferior, Virius Lupus. Albinus achieved a victory with a section of his army near Augusta Treverorum (Trier), but was insufficiently strong to follow it up, and the province remained in the Severan camp.

Septimius Severus and his army left Viminacium late in October 196, but the emperor did not accompany his men all the way to Lugdunum. At Poetovio (Ptuj, Slovenia), having learned of the growing senatorial hostility to his cause, he diverted to Rome with a detachment under the command of Cilo. There he compelled the senators to do as his troops had done and declare Clodius Albinus a public enemy, and he appeased some tempers by showing clemency toward those senators who had supported Niger. He pleased the mob with a *congiarium* and games, and then left for Gaul toward the end of the year.

The German delaying tactics had successfully robbed Albinus of the initiative in invading Italy before the Severans were ready because Severus had used the time to block the western Alpine passes. Like Julius Caesar before him, Severus refused to respect the constraints of winter campaigning and arrived in Gaul over the New Year of 196/7. If he had thought it would be an easy war, he had underestimated Albinus. Morale among the British and Spanish troops was good after their recent victory in the north, and although the Gallic provinces had few soldiers, many of the *municipia* had backed Albinus and provided him with a large auxiliary force. The first battle took place at Tinurtium (Tournos) on the Arar (River Saône), sixty-five miles north of Lugdunum. At one point in the fighting Severus was unhorsed, although unharmed—an incident that was to have dreadful repercussions (see the following chapter). The battle earned Severus an indecisive victory, and Albinus retired to Lugdunum.

According the ancient sources the battle of Lugdunum, which was fought over two days from February 19, 197, was one of the fiercest ever between Roman adversaries. While both forces were possessed of a large number of men, we should take Dio Cassius with a sizeable pinch of salt at his claim that each side fielded a hundred and fifty thousand men; perhaps only a third of that figure actually took part. In the early stages of the bitter fighting the Severans were pushed into retreat, but in the end the superb discipline of the war-hardened Illyrian legionaries told and Albinus was routed. Leaving the battlefield strewn with thousands of bodies, Severus's victorious

troops were allowed to sack Lugdunum. Albinus was trapped in a house beside the Rhône, where he committed suicide, leaving the Roman empire in the undisputed hands of Severus.

Clodius Albinus may well have made a good emperor. He had the breeding and the qualities of an administrator-aristocrat, enjoyed the patronage of the senate and showed a flair for soldiering. His misfortune was to be pitched against a rival who was his superior in cunning, daring, and sheer viciousness in battle. His death finally brought to an end a period of instability in the empire that rivaled that of the civil wars that brought Vespasian to the throne in 70. This one, however, had dragged on for several years and done immense damage to the fabric of Roman society and weakened the frontiers at a time when barbarian enemies surrounded it. The question on everyone's lips now was: would Severus be another savior as had been Vespasian?

THE SEVERAN DYNASTY

[AD 193–235]

Septimius Severus

Lucius Septimius Severus

[Augustus April 9, 193 to February 4, 211]

When he had entered Rome in June 193, Septimius Severus had shown some mercy to the memory of Didius Julianus in that his family had been left untouched and his ashes properly, if humbly, allowed burial. No such kindness was shown to Pescennius Niger and Clodius Albinus. After his decapitation, Niger's family, clients, supporters, and even whole cities that had aided his cause were punished without mercy. Although surrounded, Byzantium refused to surrender, so Severus had Niger's head taken there and paraded before the walls as an example to its citizens of what they could expect if they persisted in their defiance. Nevertheless the well-fortified city held on for almost eighteen months before capitulating in 196. Severus ordered the defenders put to the sword, the city sacked, and its walls pulled down. Albinus fared no better than Niger, although he had at least taken his own life in accordance with virtuous Roman tradition. Severus had his body laid out on the ground and rode his horse over it before having the corpse beheaded. The head went to Rome as a warning to any supporters and the corpse was tossed in the Rhône, along with the bodies of his executed wife and sons.

Who was this bloodthirsty man who had restored the empire to peace again, and who was to alter the course of its future? Severus was born April 11, 146 (some sources give 145) in the *municipium* of Leptis Magna, on the coast of Tripolitania, a region of the province of Africa. Wealthy since Punic times, Leptis Magna had been further endowed during the reign of Augustus and by the end of the second century it was an important commercial center for the empire. His father Publius Septimius Geta was a member of the *Ordo Equester* as a right gained by Severus's great-grandfather. Most likely of Punic origin, he had moved from Leptis to Italy and become an *eques*. His mother, Fulvia Pia, was descended from a family that had also moved from Africa to Italy. Little is known of Severus's father, other than that he had two cousins who became consuls. Depending on the sources, Severus was educated either well in Latin and Greek literature, or he

was not very well educated at all. He certainly seemed unwilling to do very much public oratory, although in a credible but probably colorful story the *Historiae Augustae* tells us he spoke eloquently in his own defense against a charge of youthful adultery, and was acquitted by the proconsul Didius Julianus. The *Historiae* revels in irony. Accounts suggest that Septimius Severus was small of stature but powerfully built, although in old age he became very weak and ridden with gout.

Severus went to Rome after his eighteenth birthday and received the invaluable help of his consular cousins, who arranged his entry into the senate and gained him the attention of the emperor Marcus Aurelius. Surprisingly, for the warrior-emperor he would become, Severus was never a military tribune—probably because his influential contacts made it unnecessary to take this normally useful step on the *cursus honorum*—and swiftly became a quaestor with a posting to Baetica. However, before taking up his post, he went to Africa to settle family affairs after his father's death, and while he was there he was reassigned to peaceful Sardinia because Moorish pirates were ravaging Baetica, and his inexperience counted against him. After completing his Sardinian quaestorship, he took the post of legate to the proconsul of Africa.

On his return to Rome Severus became a plebeian tribune and in 175 married Paccia Marciana, who seems also to have been of African origin. The marriage, which remained childless, was to last a decade or so until her death. The *Historiae Augustae* is the only source to claim that Marciana, “about whom he was silent in his own account of his life as a private citizen,” bore him two daughters. The story is almost certainly a convenient fiction to explain a later claimed event, when Severus made a political alliance with the aristocracy by marrying the two supposed girls to the (real) senators Aetius and Probus. However, several scholars, including in 1935 the usually estimable H.M.D. Parker (*The Roman World from AD 138 to 337*) have fallen into the trap of accepting this sole source.

In that same year, aged only twenty-nine, he was adlected into the senate by Marcus Aurelius. Severus's career continued to flourish as the empire passed from Marcus Aurelius to his son Commodus. He served as governor in Hispania Tarraconensis, was *legatus legionis* of IV Scythica in Syria and held the governorships of Gaul Lugdunensis, Sicily, and Pannonia Superior. While at Lugdunum in 187, the now-widowed Severus married Julia Domna, a woman from a prominent family of the Syrian city of Emesa. The story goes that when he

wished to marry a second time, he investigated the horoscopes of potential brides, being very skilled in astrology himself. Since he had heard that there was a certain woman in Syria whose horoscope forecast that she would marry a king, he sought her hand through the mediation of friends. Almost at once Julia made him the father of two sons, eleven months apart: Bassianus (Caracalla) in April of 188, and Geta in May 189. In 190 he served as a consul for the first time, but since this was the year Cleander sold twenty-five consulships, the office's prestige was hardly significant.

As has been mentioned, Severus's appointment to Pannonia Superior in 192 was part of Laetus's arrangements to place reliable (that is, largely fellow African) friends in key positions before the plot against Commodus could be brought to fruition. News of Pertinax's assassination on March 28, 193 quickly reached Severus, and only twelve days later on April 9, 193, Severus was proclaimed emperor by his legions. When Severus reached Rome in June, with the force of his army behind him, he ordered the praetorian guard to assemble outside the *pomerium*, unarmed and wearing only their tunics, as they would to attend a ceremony. And there he informed the cohorts that they were no longer needed, cashiered them, banished them from Rome and replaced them with men from his own legions. He also trebled the number of the *cohortes urbanae* and doubled the *vigiles* in order to increase the city's security.

On his visit to the senate the following day, there was no pretense of the kind Augustus had employed; Severus simply delivered his reasons for assuming the principate and gave the familiar promise never to execute a senator unless so directed by the senate; a provision he had no intention of observing. He then held a state funeral for Pertinax, consecrating him as one of the deified emperors. This is the moment at which he is credited with marrying his fictional daughters and nominating his sons-in-law as consuls for the following year. He organized the grain supply, which had fallen into disrepair, gave the populace a *congiarium* and some lavish games, and departed from Rome thirty days after arriving.

The campaign against Clodius Albinus that followed was detailed in the last chapter, although it bears re-iterating the incident of Severus's "death" in the battle of Tinurtium in 197. During the battle he was unhorsed and a rumor spread among his soldiers that he had been killed. In a panic they began choosing another emperor. But news of the emperor's death was premature and when he showed himself to

his men, the battle continued to its indecisive conclusion. However, the speed with which he was almost deposed unnerved Severus, especially when he heard that supporters of Albinus in Rome had cheered the news of his supposed end. He therefore decreed the deification of the disgraced Commodus, an act calculated to enrage the senators and *equites*.

Calculated Cruelty

On his return to Rome everyone feared his obvious rage. Coolly breaking his senatorial oath of four years before he had countless members of Albinus's party put to death, consulars, those of praetorian rank, nobles, and many distinguished women; and their property confiscated to swell the *fiscus*. One notable, Narcissus the athlete who had assassinated Commodus, was thrown to the lions in the arena. His unbridled cruelty earned Severus the quietly whispered nickname of the "Punic Sulla," a reference to his African origin and the notorious dictator of the late Republic. But his vicious acts should not be likened to the opportunistic violence of a coward like Commodus. As Dio Cassius wrote: "He ruled with vigor and, when he found it useful, a calculated cruelty."

Having dealt with his two rivals and made himself uncontested ruler of the Roman world, Severus next turned his attention to Rome's old foe, the Parthian empire. He needed no pretext—Vologeses' lukewarm support for Pescennius Niger more than provided the *casus belli*. In 197–79, in a swift repeat of Trajan's campaign of 115–17 and that of Lucius Verus in 163–66, Severus captured the Parthian capital of Ctesiphon and reasserted Rome's claim to Mesopotamia. Of the estimated hundred thousand inhabitants of Ctesiphon, all the men were killed and the women and children sold into slavery. The already tottering state of Parthia was dealt a blow from which it would never recover—as Rome would later have reason to regret. On January 28, 198—the centenary of Trajan's accession—Severus added the victorious title Parthicus Maximus to his nomenclature and elevated his sons: Caracalla to co-Augustus and Geta to the rank of Caesar.

Before leaving for the Parthian campaign Severus had appointed Gaius Fulvius Plautianus as one of the praetorian prefects. It is possible that Plautianus was a distant relative of Severus, since he also came from Leptis Magna. Plautianus accompanied the emperor on the campaign and then on an extensive tour of the eastern provinces that lasted for almost four years. By the time the imperial cortège returned to Rome in 202, Plautianus was the emperor's closest confidant and advisor, as well as being the sole prefect, having engineered from a distance the murder of his colleague.

The comparison made between him and Sejanus is telling, but Plautianus achieved a further status than Tiberius had allowed Sejanus, by marrying his daughter Plautilla to the heir-apparent Caracalla. In the following year lavish games celebrated Severus's

decennalia, after which the imperial family visited Leptis Magna. Severus intended to embellish his *patria* and did so with a new forum and basilica standing parallel to a massive colonnade that joined the enlarged and modernized harbor to an imposing square beside the Hadrianic baths.

It seems strange that such an extremely purposeful man as Severus should leave so much of the administration to Plautianus, who abused his position of power in many ways, but by 204 the prefect was finding his influence with the emperor on the wane. The emperor's Syrian wife Julia Domna, an intelligent woman who had surrounded herself with a retinue of scholars and writers, disliked and mistrusted him. And Caracalla, who was unhappily married to Plautilla, came to loathe his father-in-law. Severus, too, was tiring of Plautianus's ostentation, which at times seemed to surpass that of the emperor. Matters came to a head in January 205 when Caracalla informed Severus that Plautianus was plotting to have them both assassinated. Whether this was true or a fabrication of Caracalla's, Severus acted swiftly and Plautianus was taken and executed. His children were exiled, and Caracalla divorced Plautilla, who was banished to the Lipari Islands.

Two new praetorian prefects were appointed to replace Plautianus, and one of them points to an admirable aspect of Severus's interests, for he was the eminent jurist Aemilius Papinianus (Papinian). A conscientious judge, Severus appreciated legal reasoning and advanced the development of Hadrian's codification of the law. However, his position as ultimate appeals judge had brought an ever-increasing legal workload to his desk, and he came to rely heavily on his *consilium*, which was largely comprised of experienced jurists. His reign ushered in the golden age of Roman jurisprudence, and his court employed the talents of the three greatest Roman lawyers: Domitius Ulpianus (Ulpian), Papinian, and Julius Paulus.

Ulpian was born at Tyre in the later second century and would be murdered by mutinous praetorians in 223. He was a prolific writer and published over 250 works on laws, constitutions and legislation. One was an 81-book study of the praetorian edicts, another summarized earlier legal writings. About one-third of Ulpian's writing became the source for Justinian's *Digest* in the sixth-century codification of Roman Law. In writing, Paulus (active in the earlier third century) outdid Ulpian by producing about 320 works on laws and jurisprudence. His work constitutes about one-sixth of Justinian's

Digest. Papinian (c.140–212), who was probably African in origin, wrote 37 books on the law, largely discussing hypothetical or actual legal cases, and 19 books of collected opinions. As praetorian prefect, he would accompany Severus to Britannia and later be executed at Caracalla's order.

[18. Link to: The In-fighting Severans](#)

[Family Tree: House of the Severii](#)

Severan Administration and Building

The impression is given that Severus was one of the outstanding imperial builders. This is true of his hometown of Leptis Magna and the rebuilding of Byzantium. The city had remained in ruins for several years after Severus had sacked it. But then his son Caracalla persuaded the emperor to pardon the Byzantines on the grounds that, due to its position, the city's strategic importance was too great for it to be abandoned. And so, early in the third century, Severus rebuilt Byzantium on a larger scale, surrounding it with a new circuit of defensive walls. The original fortifications had enclosed only a relatively small area, extending around the acropolis from the Golden Horn to the Propontis (Sea of Marmara). The new walls began about 550 yards (503m) farther along the Golden Horn than those he had destroyed in 196, extending in a southerly direction to the new Hippodrome before curving back eastward along the lower slopes of the hill above the Propontis.

The Hippodrome was one of the largest monuments erected by Septimius Severus. It occupied the area of what is now the park in front of the Sultan Ahmed (Blue) Mosque. At the same time he erected a large baths beside the Hippodrome's northeastern corner known as the Baths of Zeuxippus. They were built to serve the crowds that thronged the Hippodrome to see the chariot races and other entertainments. The Hippodrome measured 1,312 feet in length and 386 feet in width (400 by 118m), and had an estimated capacity of a hundred thousand spectators. Constantine further enlarged it in the fourth century, after he made Byzantium his new capital of the empire.

Apart from these monumental undertakings Severus's reputation rests largely on the restoration of a very large number of ancient buildings—on which he had his own name inscribed, as though he had erected them. However, his military operations resulted in a large program of road improvement. His most famous monument is his own arch in the Forum Romanum, which can still be seen today. This was dedicated in 203, the year of his *decennalia*. Departing from the customary single arch, the Arch of Septimius Severus has three openings and, standing as it does on a high plinth above the Republican level of the Forum, it was never intended that triumphing troops should process through it. Coins show that it was originally crowned by statues of the emperor and his two sons standing in a chariot, flanked by further equestrian statues. The inscriptions and

elaborate relief carvings celebrate the Severan victories over the Parthians in Mesopotamia and Assyria.

On the Palatine Severus made some massive additions to the imperial palace, so that the huge complex now covered virtually all of the hill that had once been the parkland preserve of the aristocracy. Beside Domitian's palace he enclosed the eastern end of the hill above the Circus Maximus, and constructed the massive cliff-like loggia that rationalized parts of Tiberius's palace and the additions made by Domitian above the Forum Romanum. His most curious building was known as the Septizonium (sometimes called Septizodium), which rose like a piece of stage scenery from the Imperial Way linking the Circus Maximus to the Colosseum. Only its footings—barely visible—exist today and they give no indication as to how curious it looked. If it had a practical purpose it is not clear, although a clue may be found in the *Historiae Augustae*, which claims that “his building might present itself to those approaching from Africa,” and “he wanted to make an entrance into the Palatine House, that is into the royal entrance hall, from that side.”

Severus was responsible for substantial reforms of the financial administration. There were nominally still two treasuries: the *Aerarium Saturni* of the people, theoretically under the senate's control, and the imperial *fiscus*. In addition, there was the *Patrimonium Principis*, consisting of the great many domains throughout the empire administered by the emperor's procurators. Severus now reduced the *Aerarium* to the level of a municipal treasury for the city of Rome alone and diverted the revenues of the imperial and senatorial provinces as well as the *Patrimonium* to the *fiscus*. The initial funds received from the confiscated estates of Niger, Albinus, and their supporters went into a new treasury called the *Res Privata Principis*. Since this was then to receive any new “acquisitions” made by the emperor, it rapidly grew and outstripped the old *Patrimonium*.

Severus also undertook a massive reorganization of the army, one that was to alter the course of Roman society. On his return from the Parthian campaign, he stationed a new legion, II Parthica, just outside Rome at Albanum (Albano). He was the first ruler to station a legion in Italy, a move sometimes interpreted as an African's indication that Italian supremacy in the empire was at an end. However, it was also part of a new strategy for guarding the empire's frontiers. This legion, together with the doubled number of cohorts that had replaced the previous praetorian guard, was a central reserve which could be sent

quickly to wherever it was most needed. An additional two new legions, I Parthica and III Parthica, brought the Roman army's strength to thirty-three legions, compared with Augustus's twenty-eight and Trajan's thirty. The recruitment contained a much larger number of provincials than before, and a greater number of *numeri* (native soldiery) was enrolled, especially mounted archers from Mesopotamia and Palmyra.

Severus also took steps to ensure greater loyalty from the troops and their officers. The soldiers' pay was increased by a half, and—in recognition of the extensions of the service periods made by previous emperors—they were allowed to marry (or cohabit under the common-law of *contubernium*). Where previously entry to the officer ranks was only allowed to the nobility or *equites*, Severus provided greater promotion opportunities to non-commissioned officers and even rankers to join the elite and possibly enter the civil service. However, the burden of paying a much larger number of troops their better salaries fell on the taxpayers. It was a development that would lead to increased hardship, inflation, and in the end, throughout many areas of the empire, virtually wiped out the middle class of Roman society.

Family Favorites

The order Severus was able to impose on the empire through the forces of arms and the law failed to extend to his family. His adolescent sons, Caracalla and Geta, displayed a sibling rivalry that sometimes resulted in physical injury. So close in age, it is hard to doubt that either had any intention of sharing the throne after their father's death. The antipathy between them was not lessened when Severus elevated Geta to co-Augustus with himself and Caracalla. Severus became convinced that the only way of restoring them to some sort of imperial responsibility lay in the discipline of military life. Despite his deteriorating health, the sixty-two-year-old warrior-emperor took his two squabbling sons to Britannia on campaign in 208.

Events in the province had taken a nasty turn. Back in 197, when Clodius Albinus made his bid for the purple, the province had been denuded of troops to support his claim. The new governor, Virius Lupus, was confronted by a serious situation. Taking advantage of the depleted Roman garrison, the Maiatae—a Caledonian tribe that had broken through the Antonine Wall during the reign of Commodus and been allowed to settle between it and Hadrian's Wall—overran a great part of northern Britannia. Hadrian's Wall was badly damaged, and military and urban centers as far south as Deva (Chester) and Eboracum (York) were overthrown. Lupus eventually restored some order by bribing the Maiatae to return home, and began rebuilding Hadrian's Wall, a task completed by his successor Alfenius Senecio.

Severus, together with Caracalla, Geta, and the admirable prefect Papinian, arrived with enormous reinforcements and established his headquarters at Eboracum, from where he planned to take the war into Caledonia. Geta was charged with administering the province and the business of the empire, while Severus and Caracalla led the army. In 209 under Severus's personal leadership and again in 210 under the command of Caracalla, the Romans penetrated deep into the north. But there was to be no repeat of Agricola's great victory of Mons Graupius. The tribesmen had learned their lesson on that occasion and refused to confront the Roman army in open battle. Adopting guerrilla tactics, they harassed the Romans at every opportunity. Roman losses were tremendous; Dio Cassius put the figure at no less than fifty thousand.

In the fall of 210 Severus ceded a large tract of the country to the Caledonians in return for a peace treaty, before retiring to Eboracum.

In the following year the Maetae revolted again. This time Severus ordered the massacre of every tribe member, whether or not they were part of the fighting force. Anyone who was not Roman was to die. But he was unable to lead the expedition. Weak from illness and fearing his time was near, he remained at Eboracum, where he died on February 4, 211. His final words to Caracalla and Geta were reported as being: "Agree with each other, give money to the soldiers, and scorn all other men." They heeded the last two points, but not the first.

Lucius Publius Septimius Geta

[Caesar 198; Co-Augustus February 4, 211 to February 212]

It is convenient to deal first with Geta, not because he was the principal of the two sons of Septimius Severus but simply because he did not last long. Geta was born on May 27, 189 at Mediolanum (Milan), where Severus was resident in between his governorships of Gaul Lugdunensis and Sicily while Commodus was emperor. He was named after Severus's father and was only eleven months younger than his brother, Lucius Septimius Bassianus (Caracalla). History reveals little about his upbringing, but since his mother Julia Domna was a scholarly woman, it is likely that Geta received a well-rounded education. There is no indication, however, that he undertook any steps on the *cursus honorum*, indeed there was no need because of his early elevation to high state. He was made Caesar when he was only nine and co-Augustus with his father and brother late in 209 when he was twenty.

When Severus died in 211, the situation recalled that of half a century earlier when the empire was ruled jointly by two adoptive brothers, Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus. In that instance the authority of Verus was more official than real, and he was happy to defer to Marcus Aurelius in matters of state. Caracalla might well have been satisfied had Geta behaved like Lucius, but Geta saw his *imperium* as being the equal of his brother's. The two were barely on speaking terms during the return journey to Rome from Britannia. Once in the capital, the situation worsened. Government soon ground to a halt as the brothers bickered on every appointment and over every policy decision. In the vast complex of the Palatine palace there was plenty of room for the brothers to avoid each other, and they went so far as to divide it between them. This may have been the source for some histories to claim that they intended do the same with the empire itself.

By the end of 211 hotheads among Caracalla's faction were advising him to have Geta murdered, and there was at least one unsuccessful attempt at the start of the festival of Saturnalia before the plotters finally succeeded in February 212. So the story goes, Geta was persuaded to attend a meeting of reconciliation on neutral ground—his mother's private quarters. In the spirit of friendship, Geta went unattended by bodyguards, but before he reached the appointed place he was set on by soldiers and stabbed. Wounded and bleeding, Geta

ran to his mother and, clinging to her, died. One source suggests that Caracalla did the stabbing, another that he was present in the hallway, egging the soldiers on. The second experiment in joint rule had ended in fratricide; at least Lucius Verus had expired of natural causes.

Caracalla said the murder came in response to Geta's plotting, and the death started a wholesale slaughter of Geta's sympathizers. The looting and bloodshed lasted for many days, during which it is said as many as twenty thousand died. This is almost certainly an exaggeration promoted by those who hated Caracalla. However, we do know the extent to which Caracalla went to expunge his brother's hated memory through the often-clumsy erasures of Geta's name from the Severan monuments. There is an easily viewed example in the fourth line of the inscription on the Arch of Septimius Severus: Geta's name has been blotted out and replaced with additional honorifics for his murderer. Inevitably, popular feelings were strong for Geta and tradition soon idealized him as a kind and gentle prince, taken by treachery far too soon. This, too, is obviously an exaggeration, since there is no evidence that Geta was substantially better than his brother. His ashes were buried in the Septizonium, where they remained until the accession of Elagabalus in 219, who transferred them to the Mausoleum of Hadrian to join those of his father and brother.

[Caesar 195; Co-Augustus February 4, 211 to February 212; sole to April 8, 217]

Caracalla was born in Lugdunum on April 4, 188, where Severus was serving as the provincial governor. The name Bassianus commemorated the Syrian family of his mother Julia Domna. The nickname by which history knows him, Caracallus (Caracalla), which derived from his favorite dress, the *caracallus* or long, hooded Celtic cloak, was never used officially or in his presence. He was only ten when Severus elevated him to co-Augustus, and to establish the dynastic link Septimius Bassianus Caracalla became known as Marcus Aurelius Antoninus.

Caracalla is another of Roman history's enigmas. He may have been mentally unstable, but was clearly no Commodus, despite an obsession with becoming an oriental conqueror like Alexander the Great. Christian writers cited his cruelty, immorality, avarice, and treachery, but this is probably attributable to his indifference to the continuing plight of the growing sect, and his attitude is in keeping with most of his predecessors. Few historians disagree that Caracalla was a brave soldier, successful administrator, and did much to restore the security of the empire. As indicated by his adoption of barbarian dress, he had little sympathy with traditional Roman virtues or customs.

Caracalla was impatient to take control of the empire, so much so that Herodian claims he attempted to persuade his father's physicians "to do him some mischief" as he lay on the imperial sickbed in Eburacum. On his father's death, Caracalla immediately put into operation his plans to become the sole ruler. His first action was to make peace with the Caledonians. The Romans abandoned the Antonine Wall and withdrew behind the greatly strengthened Hadrianic wall, which was to provide security to northern Britannia for a further century. While it was a suitable arrangement, it was motivated by Caracalla's desire to return to Rome as quickly as possible to consolidate his position. His second act was the removal of any of his father's supporters who might be expected to enforce Severus's dictat that his two sons should rule jointly. Papinian was deposed from his position as praetorian prefect and later executed, his old tutor and his father's counselor were both put to death, as was his divorced wife Plautilla. Papinian was replaced by Marcus Opellius Macrinus, a native of Africa who had attracted the attention of

Plautianus and risen to a high office in the imperial service. Geta might well have been a victim at this point but for the intervention of the army, who viewed the younger brother with greater affection, since he more resembled his father in character and appearance. Thus the Severans returned to Rome and the dreadful events related above.

When the terror of early 212 had subsided, Caracalla undertook a series of administrative reforms. In keeping with his father's military policies, the troops received further increases in pay and in legal rights. His most significant innovation, however, was the granting of citizenship to every single free man within the bounds of the empire, thus completing a process begun by Claudius 150 years earlier. This *constitutio antoniniana* was designed to achieve greater standardization in the increasingly bureaucratic Roman state, but cynics point to the immense increase in taxable persons as the real reason. At the same time, he gave jurisdictional rights over citizens to the provincial governors. This was consistent with Hadrian's reform that reduced the necessity in Italy of bringing appeals to Rome for hearing, but extended it to the empire as a whole. Christian writers noted that this rather doubtful boon meant that while the martyrs henceforth could at least be executed as Romans, their right of appeal to the emperor was abrogated.

In the sphere of jurisdiction, Caracalla was quite unlike Severus, content to leave the hearing of cases to others. He also reintroduced the hated *delatores*, and his secret agents exercised a tyranny over all classes, including the senatorial order, to which he showed only disdain. For his administration, he drew on the *equites* for his ministers, further humiliating the senate by giving his cousin by marriage, Sextus Varius Marcellus, the conjunctive offices of *praetorian prefect* and *praefectus urbi*. This made Marcellus the most powerful man in Rome after the emperor, and he acted as Caracalla's viceroy during the emperor's lengthy absences from the capital.

The reforms of the *constitutio antoniniana* failed to bring in sufficient revenue to cover the increased costs of Caracalla's lavish spending on the army. So he began following Nero's precedent of debasing the currency, a practice that was to continue and bring the empire to the brink of bankruptcy within forty years.

Caracalla began no concerted building program, but he is remembered for starting the magnificent *Thermae Antoninianae*, which today bear his name as the Baths of Caracalla. Into this grandiose project went greater sums than many of his more illustrious

predecessors had spent on several buildings. When completed after his death, it accommodated up to sixteen hundred bathers in utmost luxury. The baths complex measured 390 feet (119m) wide by 740 feet (226m) long. The largest room, the circular vaulted *tepidarium*, measured 82 by 170 feet (25 by 52m), with a dome height estimated at 125 feet (38m). The baths were sited amid huge gardens surrounded by two libraries and two temples, a stadium built on the vast cistern, and ranges of shops. The water was supplied by a newly built extension of the Aqua Marcia known as the Aqua Antoniniana. Although the main building seems to have been completed just before Caracalla's death, the entire complex was not finished until the reign of Severus Alexander.

Caracalla's Military Campaigns

Caracalla did not spend long in Rome, and when he set out early in 213 for Gaul, and a military campaign in Germania Superior and Raetia, he was only to return to the city once for a brief duration. The reason for military activity in the north was a newly arrived tribe in the region called the Alamanni, which had migrated westward under pressure from more barbarians to the east of their original habitat. A great deal of money was spent on strengthening the frontier; many of the forts originally constructed of wood were remade of stone, and new ones built. On August 11 Caracalla crossed the Raetian *limes* and Suetrius Sabinus, governor of Germania Superior, set out from Moguntiacum (Mainz) in a pincer movement. The strategy was a success, and the Alamanni were soundly defeated near the Moenus (Main). Caracalla was hailed *imperator* and added the title Germanicus Maximus to his nomenclature.

Further to the north around the mouth of the Elbe, however, the Roman campaign was less successful, and another German tribe had to be bribed to go away, a cost the empire could ill afford. After wintering in Rome, the emperor set out again early in 214 for a confrontation with Parthia, although his progress was leisurely. He went by way of the Illyrian provinces of Pannonia and Dacia, and the Balkans, only crossing the Hellespont—where he narrowly escaped drowning in a shipwreck—late in the year. Caracalla then visited Pergamum and Ilium (Troy) before wintering at Nicomedia.

Civil war between brothers and rival kings Vologeses VI and Artabanus V had brought instability to the weakened Parthian empire, and Caracalla wished to take advantage and consolidate Roman control in the region. However, the first move made against Armenia in 215 under the command of Theocritus, a freedman who had first won fame as an actor, was a failure, and the Romans retreated into northern Syria. Any plans Caracalla had for an immediate move against Parthia were forestalled by a revolt in Egypt. The legion stationed in Alexandria had been withdrawn to join the war against the Alamanni in 213 and the garrison left behind was too small to handle rioters complaining about Caracalla's excessive taxation. With a considerable portion of his force, Caracalla went to Alexandria and dealt severely with the rebels. The governor was executed for his failure to contain the trouble and thousands of the city's young men were killed. Alexandria was cordoned off into zones to prevent the free movement of its residents, and games and other privileges were

revoked.

There was another reason for the suspension of war with Parthia. The *casus belli* had been Rome's demand for the return of two deserters, but somewhat inconveniently Vologeses complied and handed them over. On his return from Alexandria to Antiochia at the end of 215, Caracalla asked for the hand of Artabanus's daughter in marriage. Artabanus had won the civil war with Vologeses, and was in no mood to do as Caracalla asked. There are clear indications that, in his incarnation of Alexander the Great, the emperor had dreams of uniting the two great civilizations, which puts his unlikely request in a more understandable light. In any event, the refusal became a new excuse for war. Caracalla proceeded to Edessa (Urfa) in 216 and annexed the buffer state of Osrhoene, and then advanced into Parthia, sacking several fortresses. But on hearing that the enemy had retired to consolidate for a more effective resistance, Caracalla did likewise, returning to Edessa for the winter.

Some modern observers have attributed an uncommon religiosity to Caracalla because the ancient sources mention the zeal with which he visited temples during his travels, but this does not fit comfortably with his secular character and there is a more prosaic explanation to hand. During the Alamanni campaign, Caracalla had become afflicted with a chronic illness that no physician seemed able to cure. Wherever he went, he attended temples famous for their connection to healing. After subduing the Alamanni, he went to the shrine of a Celtic god called Grannus—Romanized as Apollo Grannus—at Aurelia Aquensis, which was renowned then, as it is today as Baden-Baden, for its healing waters. In Pergamum the emperor spent a whole night sleeping in the temple of Asclepius, the god of healing. At Alexandria the exercise was repeated in the Serapeum, built by Ptolemy III in honor of the syncretic Greco-Egyptian deity Isis-Serapis, who was associated with death and healing.

On April 8, 217 Caracalla set out from Edessa on a similar mission to make a sacrifice at the ancient temple of the Syrian deity Sin (Moon) at Carrhae (Harran). During a pause for the emperor to evacuate his bowels, he was attacked and killed by a common soldier called Julius Martialis. It seemed a fittingly ignoble end for a fratricide. After his divorce from Plautilla, Caracalla had been content to remain single, and there were no children. Whether Caracalla had made any plans for the succession is not known, but since he was only twenty-nine when he died and certainly lacked any Antonine

prudence, it is unlikely to have yet occurred to him. The emperor's bodyguard took the murderer and killed him, while the troops hailed the praetorian prefect Macrinus as the new emperor. The relief felt universally in Rome at the tyrant's death ensured that the senate hastily recognized the army's choice.

[19. Link to: Caracalla's Campaigns & Macrinus](#)

[Family Tree: House of the Severii](#)

Macrinus

Marcus Opellius Severus Macrinus

[Augustus April 11, 217 to June 8, 218]

Diadumenian

Marcus Opellius Diadumenianus Antoninus

[Caesar April 11, 217; co-Augustus in 218]

Macrinus was not remotely related to the Severi, although for historical convenience he is usually included in the dynasty. He also had the unique distinction of being the first Roman emperor who did not belong to the senatorial order and the only legitimate ruler of the undivided empire to never put foot in Rome during his reign. There is, however, little else to recommend him to history. Macrinus was born in the colony of Caesarea in Mauretania Caesariensis in about 165. Before his appointment to imperial service by Plautianus nothing is known about his early life.

The subsequent course of his career points to Macrinus having received the well-rounded education of an *eques* with an emphasis on law, and when he went to Rome Plautianus employed his services as a legal adviser. He must have kept himself sufficiently aloof from Plautianus, however, because rather than suffer with him when the praetorian prefect fell, Macrinus rose rapidly through the ranks of the imperial service to become controller of the *Res Privata Principis*, Severus's private estates. At some point he married and a son, Diadumenianus, was born. Caracalla appointed Macrinus praetorian prefect to replace Papinian. He shared this command with Oclatinus Adventus, but the real power belonged to Macrinus since Adventus was an uneducated and aging man who had risen from the ranks, a beneficiary of Severus's democratization of the army.

Macrinus and Adventus accompanied Caracalla on the eastern journey in 213 and the subsequent campaign. Macrinus may already have entertained suspicions that Caracalla was concerned about his loyalty, and the motive for the emperor's murder seems to have been Macrinus's fear for his own safety. A story is told that bears the hallmarks of a dramatic device in a play. An astrologer advised the emperor's viceroy in Rome that Caracalla was in danger from Macrinus and his son. A letter of warning was dispatched to Caracalla, but when it arrived the emperor was watching a chariot race. Since it was known to be dangerous to interrupt Caracalla during a race, the courier gave it to the prefect. On reading its contents, Macrinus felt

bound to make the astrologer's prediction come true.

Macrinus sought a possible assassin, someone sufficiently angered at Caracalla that he could be suborned to act in revenge, and found his man in Julius Martialis. Two motives are given. Cassius Dio says that Caracalla had refused to promote Martialis to the rank of centurion. Herodian's account provides a much stronger reason for revenge in that Caracalla had executed Martialis's brother on a trumped up charge. What is surely certain is that Macrinus had no intention of the assassin surviving to tell any tales and made sure of his death at the hands of the German bodyguard as soon as possible after the deed was accomplished.

Macrinus feigned great sorrow at Caracalla's murder, but canvassed support from among the troops, who proclaimed him on April 11 , 217 after a delay of three days. Macrinus immediately identified himself with the Severi by taking the name Severus, and adding that of Antoninus to his son. He elevated Diadumenian to Caesar and named him as his heir. He also removed Adventus, sending him back to Rome to be urban prefect, a demanding task for which he was ill suited. Macrinus won some sympathy by the tried and tested policy of reversing the worst of his predecessor's taxes and announcing an amnesty for political exiles.

However, events prevented Macrinus from returning to Rome, a circumstance that quickly turned initial popularity into disaffection among the populace, especially after a particularly violent, late-August thunderstorm started a fire that damaged the Colosseum and caused widespread flooding, especially in the Forum Romanum. Blame for the dilatory response to the disaster was laid at the door of Adventus and he was dismissed. The senators, while acquiescing to the eastern army's choice, were unhappy that Macrinus had assumed the imperial powers and titles before they had been conferred by the senate's customary decree. Recent history had shown that poor relations between ruler and senate need not be a serious handicap to an emperor, but losing the army's loyalty was inevitably fatal.

The Parthians, having retreated from Caracalla to regroup, now returned in strength and invaded Mesopotamia. Macrinus hoped to avoid a battle with Artabanus, but indecisive fighting took place in the vicinity of Nisibis (Nusaybin, Syria). Neither side gained much advantage, but as soon as the campaigning season drew to a close, a peace was patched up that did not favor the Romans. Macrinus returned the Parthian prisoners taken during the fighting and paid a

large indemnity to Artabanus. As a part of the settlement, Armenia passed out of Roman control, although retaining on paper a nominal recognition of Roman sovereignty. None of this was calculated to instill confidence within the army. Worse was to come. Along the lower Danube the Dacian tribes had invaded on hearing of Caracalla's death. Since the larger part of the European legions was tied up in the east, Macrinus was obliged to order his local commanders to reach a peace agreement with the Dacians.

Downfall of a “Usurper”

Unrest was further fostered when Macrinus, attempting some economies, announced a return to the Severan rates of pay for recruits, agreeing to give Caracalla’s promised increases only to long-serving soldiers. With the recruits grumbling and the European legions clamoring for either a fight to the death with Parthia or an immediate return to their homelands, Macrinus’s position was looking decidedly uncertain. And at this point the Severi struck back through the women—the indefatigable Julias.

At frequent moments in Roman history, women as much as men became prominent in the administration of the empire, Livia Drusilla being the first. Few periods, however, were as dominated by the actions of women as that of the Severan dynasty, during which time four luminaries—all named Julia—worked with, behind, or against the emperors. They were the Julias: Domna, Maesa, Soaemias, and Mamaea.

As the second wife of Septimius Severus, Julia Domna exercised influence in the empire for more than twenty years. She was born at the Syrian city of Emesa, younger daughter of Julius Bassianus, a member of the local aristocracy and hereditary high-priest of the sun-god El-Gabal, the office to which, despite his young age, her grandnephew Varius Avitus Bassianus was later elected. Her older sister Julia Maesa married the wealthy Emesene equestrian Julius Avitus and bore him two daughters, Julia Soaemias and Julia Mamaea. Maesa spent many years in Rome with her sister, during which time she accumulated an even greater fortune, which in error Macrinus allowed her to retain when he banished her from Antioch.

Maesa’s elder daughter, Julia Soaemias, was born in about 180. She married Sextus Varius Marcellus, a native of Apamea in Syria, who had a successful equestrian career before being adlected into the senate. They had numerous children, of whom Avitus became the emperor Elagabalus. Soaemias later played a significant role in government and administration. She also established a *senaculum mulierum* on the Quirinal, which concerned itself with the behavior of women. However, her own morals were always in question and she was accused of prostituting herself as part of the divine mysteries of El-Gabal. In consequence she was instrumental in allowing her son his extravagances.

Julia Maesa’s younger daughter Julia Mamaea was quite different to her sister Soaemias. Not of the branch that drew benefit from the

family's association with El-Gabal, Mamaea avoided contact with the oriental religion that characterized the reign of her nephew. She married an *eques* called Gessius Marcianus and in 208 bore him Alexianus, who later became the emperor Severus Alexander. Mamaea was said to have been converted to Christianity by Origen (185–c.253), one of the greatest of the early theologians of the eastern church, and was recognized as *religiosissima*.

To Macrinus's misfortune Caracalla's mother Julia Domna and her immensely wealthy sister Julia Maesa had accompanied the new emperor to Antioch. These two indomitable women now represented a threat to him and voiced aloud their correct suspicions that Macrinus was responsible for the death of their son and nephew. Macrinus ordered them to leave the city, but Julia Domna, seriously ill by now, chose to starve herself to death. Julia Maesa retired with her fortune to her native city of Emesa and the palatial family home, where her widowed daughters Julia Soaemias and Julia Mamaea lived with their sons. Soaemias's boy Varius Avitus Bassianus was the eldest, and although he was only fourteen he had just become the chief priest of El-Gabal, a Syrian form of the Phoenician god Ba'al. When she overheard some soldiers on leave from legion III Gallicia, which was stationed close to Emesa, remark on how like Caracalla Avitus looked, Julia Maesa conceived of a plot to place her grandson on the throne. She and Soaemias put about the story that Avitus was the illegitimate but only son of Caracalla, and that Macrinus had usurped his birthright. Soaemias was a notorious adulteress in Rome, and so the story was likely to be believed.

When the garrison was promised a large donative, the soldiers accepted Avitus as Caracalla's rightful successor with the name Marcus Aurelius Antoninus and proclaimed the boy-priest emperor in May 218. Macrinus responded by sending a force of cavalry under the command of his praetorian prefect Ulpius Julianus, but the troops deserted to Antoninus, killed Ulpius and sent his head back to Macrinus. The Antonine force at Emesa was now considerably enlarged, news of which, together with the "discovery" of Caracalla's son, created further disaffection as it spread. Macrinus left Antioch for Apamea where II Parthica was headquartered and attempted to restore confidence by rescinding the reduction in recruits' pay, offering a huge donative to all the men, and elevating his nine-year old son Diadumenian to co-Augustus.

These actions appeared to appease the legion temporarily, for

Macrinus set out with II Parthica and cohorts of the praetorian guard to attack Antoninus, but in the ensuing skirmish the legion deserted. Macrinus was forced to retreat to Antioch, with only the distant support of the governor of Egypt, Julius Basilianus, and that of Marius Secundus, governor of Phoenicia. This was small comfort, since Phoenicia had few troops and far-off Egypt had been drained to support the Alamanni campaign. With a severely reduced army, he met the Antonine force in battle outside Antioch, where the outcome was never really in any doubt. Macrinus fled the battlefield and—disguised by having shaved his hair and beard—tried to reach Europe, but was recognized by a centurion at Chalcedon on the Bosphorus and arrested. He was taken back to Antioch and put to death. Diadumenian shared his father's fate when he was caught attempting to flee to Parthia. The date of the final battle was June 8, 218, the day Antoninus counted as his *dies imperii*, after which he became known as Elagabalus, in keeping with the oriental custom of identifying a priest with the god whom he served.

Elagabalus

Varius Avitus Bassianus / Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Elagabalus

[Augustus June 8, 218 to March 6, 222]

Good-looking, effeminate, and a moral pervert, Elagabalus brought to Rome a profligacy that outdid even the worst excesses of Commodus, drenching the city in a wave of despised orientalism. Varius Avitus Bassianus was born at some time between the fall of 203 and the spring of 204. His connection to the Severi was strong through his maternal grandmother Julia Maesa, widow of the consul Julius Avitus and sister of the Augusta Julia Domna. By the time of the events in 217–18, Elagabalus was consecrated to the honorable ministry of high priest of El-Gabal in his temple of Sol Invictus (the Unconquered Sun). The boy was under his grandmother's thumb, for his flighty mother Julia Soaemias was more concerned with her latest lover, the camp commander of legion III Gallicia, Publius Valerius Comazon. The wealthy family home in Emesa—which more resembled an eastern potentate's court than a virtuous Roman dwelling—was run by a team of eunuchs under the control of a certain Gannys. History is uncertain about Gannys, who is cited as a eunuch of Julia Maesa and also as the well-endowed lover of Julia Soaemias. If the latter, his unwelcome influence over the young emperor offers a reason for his later sudden execution by Elagabalus.

In any event, it was Gannys who, in consort with Julia Maesa, conceived the plan to place Elagabalus on the throne with the ruse that he was really Caracalla's son (in her far-advanced promiscuity Soaemias was clearly unconcerned at what this implied of her reputation). The plotters worked on Comazon, who agreed to smuggle Elagabalus into the legion's camp at nearby Raphanea on the night of May 15, 218, and at dawn the next day presented the fourteen-year-old to the troops.

In the resulting battle with Macrinus, eunuchs and women played their parts. In a particularly dangerous moment, when it seemed that the emperor's forces might prevail, Julia Maesa and Julia Soaemias, who, according to the eastern custom, had attended the army, threw themselves from their covered wagon in front of the enemy and exhorted their troops to greater endeavors. As Gibbon wrote:

Antoninus himself, who, in the rest of his life, never acted like a man, in this important crisis of his fate approved himself a hero, mounted his horse, and, at the head of his rallied troops, charged sword in hand among the thickest of the enemy; whilst the eunuch Gannys, whose occupations had

been confined to female cares and the soft luxury of Asia, displayed the talents of an able and experienced general.

After the defeat of Macrinus, Elagabalus entered Antioch and wrote to the senate claiming the *tribunicia potestas* and *imperium proconsulare*, an assumption that did nothing to endear the unknown boy-emperor to the Roman nobility. But as with Macrinus, there was little to be done but agree to an accession guaranteed by the army. According to his wishes, his grandmother and his mother were each proclaimed Augusta. The imperial court set out on the journey to Rome, but Elagabalus was in no hurry. Ignoring Julia Maesa's urgent pleas to reach the capital quickly, he spent the winter at Nicomedia indulging himself in the fanatical rites of his religion, which his mother eagerly encouraged. He also countered his grandmother's sensible suggestion that he should now put away the elaborate gowns of a Syrian priest and dress in a more appropriately Roman fashion by sending to Rome a painting of himself in full stately regalia. According to the now-contemporary Dio Cassius:

He was drawn in his sacerdotal robes of silk and gold, after the loose flowing fashion of the Medes and Phoenicians; his head was covered with a lofty tiara, his numerous collars and bracelets were adorned with gems of an inestimable value. His eyebrows were tinged with black, and his cheeks painted with an artificial red and white.

To the equestrian and senatorial orders this extravagant image was one of decadent barbarity. The influence of oriental cults had been on the rise since the days of Hadrian, but their outward expression was still one of suitable solemnity that avoided distressing traditional Roman virtues. However, it was simply a warning of what to expect. The display of superstitious gratitude to Sol Invictus was to be the only serious business of his reign. Elagabalus entered Rome in the spring of 219 in a great procession through the streets over which gold dust had been strewn. The god, a black conical stone believed to have fallen to earth from heaven and which Elagabalus had brought to Rome, rested on a bed of precious gems on a chariot drawn by six milk-white horses. Elagabalus did not ride with it, but holding the reins walked slowly backward supported by his ministers, staring up in rapture at the divine presence. This procession was to be repeated on many occasions, eventually culminating in the magnificent new temple built on the Palatine, where the god was to dwell.

The temple, when it was completed, rivaled in size Hadrian's Venus et Roma (although the latter was an enclosed building, whereas the

Temple of Elegabalus, as it is now known, was mostly comprised of an open court. It was the largest single structure on the Palatine, and completed the covering in imperial architecture of the hill that had once been the residential area of wealthy Roman families. Elegabalus required his god to be married, and in accordance with his wishes the statue of Pallas was removed from the Vestal Virgins' custody. But on reflection the emperor rejected her as being too warlike and settled instead on the Carthaginian Urania. It was perfect symbolism—the Syrian Sun was joined in divine wedlock to the Phoenician Moon.

In the temple the richest wines, the most exotic sacrifices, and the rarest aromatics were profusely consumed on the altar. All around troupes of Syrian girls performed lascivious dances to the sound of barbaric music. With carefully concealed disgust, leading members of the administration and army, clothed in long Phoenician tunics, officiated in the meanest functions. The emperor was officially styled Priest of the Unconquered Sun-God Elagabalus, and this title took precedence over all the other imperial titles. Among his imperial entourage came many low-born Syrians, who were now granted positions of high office. Foremost among them was Publius Valerius Comazon, who had proclaimed Elagabalus emperor at Raphanea. He was appointed praetorian prefect and shortly after urban prefect, which made him the most powerful man in the administration.

Elagabalus was a cruel and treacherous youth. While some were raised, others were killed, and Comazon was a willing executioner. First to go was the eunuch (or, perhaps, super-stud) Gannys, who had helped Elagabalus win his final battle against Macrinus. Several recalled provincial governors shared his fate, as well as men of consular rank and any who displayed probity. Moral depravity was a required characteristic for preferment. The care of the grain supply was given to a hairdresser and the *praefectus vigilum* went to a favored charioteer. Needless to say, none of these men was a capable administrator. The translation of this grotesque oriental cult into the heart of Rome filled the nobility with detestation. In 219 Julia Maesa married Elagabalus off to the nobly born Julia Cornelia Paula. But in the following year he divorced her to marry Julia Aquilia Severa. All of Rome was scandalized, for Severa was a Vestal Virgin. He threw Severa aside a year later and, having executed her husband only a short time before, married Annia Faustina, who counted Marcus Aurelius among her ancestors. The histories insist that he married no less than five wives during his brief reign.

If this flurry of marital activity suggests the sexual antics of a youthful prince, it is misleading, for Elagabalus had little desire for any of his wives. He was not the first emperor to have shown a preference for sex with other young men, but none before him had flaunted their homosexuality so openly. (Hadrian's obsession with Antinöus had manifested itself to the public more as a cult than a public love affair). As Gibbon so neatly put it: "The master of the Roman world affected to copy the dress and manners of the female sex [and] preferred the distaff to the scepter." As he entered puberty Elagabalus had the hairs plucked from his body in order to appear more feminine, and delighted in appearing before his subjects wearing feminine clothes and cosmetics. A blond-haired Carian slave named Hierocles acted as the emperor's "husband," and was sometimes employed to "capture" Elagabalus when he offered himself to passers by as a prostitute and then administer a sound beating as a "punishment."

[20: Link to: The Late Severans](#)

[Family Tree: House of the Severii](#)

Elegabalus and Alexander

Elsewhere, there were continual signs of disturbance. The first came as early as the start of 219, and the rebels were the men of III Gallica, the very legion that had raised up Elagabalus. Having rapidly come to regret their support, they attempted to make Verus, their new *legatus legionis*, emperor. He had been promoted through the ranks from centurion to adlection into the senate, but his pretense at imperial power was very short-lived. The praetorians still owed their allegiance to Elagabalus. Verus was executed and the legion cashiered. Shortly afterward a lowly physician's son named Gellius Maximus, who had also been adlected into the senate and was a senior officer of IV Scythica in Syria, took advantage of III Gallica's disturbance to declare himself emperor. Again, Elagabalus was able to rely on the praetorians to quell the revolt and Gellius Maximus was put to death. Other names crop up, including Uranius Antonius, Sallustius, and a certain Seleucus, who may have been Julius Antonius Seleucus, governor of Moesia, or Marcus Flavius Vitellius Seleucus, a consul in 221.

The fact is, there was a lot of unrest.

Julia Maesa became increasingly concerned that the emperor's conduct and growing unpopularity would threaten her own ascendancy and control of the government (she had even been given the unprecedented right of a seat in the senate). She determined that her other grandson Alexianus—a straight-laced and likeable youngster of thirteen—should be given official standing. She tricked Elagabalus into adopting his cousin, on the grounds that he would be able to hand over the boring matters of government—that is the very few tasks Elagabalus bothered with—in order to devote more time to his priestly duties. Alexianus was adopted on July 10, 221 and became the heir to Elagabalus with the name of Marcus Aurelius Severus Alexander, and received a share in the imperial powers and prerogatives.

Alexander's friendly disposition soon endeared him to both the people and the soldiers. Elagabalus became jealous of his cousin's popularity and began to fear its consequences. By the beginning of 222, the processes of government were grinding to a halt as officials struggled to understand where the real authority lay. Elagabalus could still count on the unqualified support of his mother, Julia Soaemias, but he refused to speak to his grandmother, who clearly preferred Alexander. The tyrant sought first to corrupt his cousin by enticing him with all manner of perversions in a ridiculous attempt to damage

his reputation, and when this failed, to kill him. But Alexander was well protected, thanks to his mother Julia Mamaea's prudence. Moreover, Alexander had become the firm favorite of the praetorians, who saw little of their emperor, since he had no interest in military matters.

Furious at failure, Elagabalus demoted Alexander from the rank and privileges of Caesar, but this roused the ire of a chilly senate and a furious *Castra Praetoria*. The guard swore to protect Alexander's life and keep a close watch on the emperor's conduct. The unstable situation could not last, and it may have been Maesa and Mamaea who conspired to leak a rumor to the praetorians that another attempt to assassinate Alexander had been barely foiled. The natural suspicion that they were too late and that their darling had already been murdered inflamed praetorian passions. The soldiers demanded that Elagabalus produce his cousin to prove that he was safe. The emperor responded by attempting to punish the ringleaders of what he considered to be a mutiny. The indignant praetorians rose up on March 6, 222 and massacred the minions of Elagabalus, his mother Julia Soaemias, and the young emperor himself. They mutilated his corpse and then dragged it through the streets to the Tiber and tossed it in. "His memory was branded with eternal infamy by the senate; the justice of whose decree has been ratified by posterity," adds Gibbon.

The once-popular view of the failure of Elagabalus's reign as a clash of cultures between oriental and traditional Roman religions ignores several facts. The syncretization of religions had always been a relatively smooth process due to the sheer number of cults present within the empire. And there seems to have been early acceptance of oriental cults such as that of Isis, to whom a temple had been dedicated in Rome before the accession of Augustus. The cult of Mithra, or Mithras, an ancient Indo-Iranian god of truth and light, reached Rome in the second half of the first century BC, and became widespread in the imperial period. The cult appealed to merchants, soldiers, and charioteers. Even though Elagabalus's promotion of the Emesene sun-god was certainly ridiculed by contemporary observers, this cult was popular among soldiers, who associated it with that of Mithras, and it would remain so. Indeed, many succeeding emperors—and not all of Syrian origin—would come to regard Sol Invictus as the primary—but not necessarily exclusive—deity of the Roman pantheon.

In most respects, the reign of Elagabalus recalls that of Caligula, a callow youth raised in luxury who then suffered dramatic changes of

fortune; the deaths of his father, grandfather, and his cousin, the emperor Caracalla, all within the space of one year must have been destabilizing. While there is “no smoke without a fire,” we should consider much of the contemporary historians’ invective as consequential to their detestation of a young oriental who was elevating his god above all others. To the stoics, neo-Platonists and neo-Pythagoreans who sought to establish a universal religion through the combination of all creeds, Elagabalus was creating a kind of pagan catholicism that ignored any god but his own. As to the sexual excesses, the practical Romans acknowledged homosexuality (although perhaps not transsexuality) as a given but did not accept its public exhibition. How much of what they claim Elagabalus got up to actually occurred in public, as against in the (crowded) privacy of the Palatine palace, is a matter of conjecture. However, modern commentators have questioned the authenticity of contemporary witnesses over the need of depilation to beautify a boy barely in his adolescence, which calls into question many of their other claims. Perhaps we should look less at the emperor’s sexual antics as the cause of public hatred and more at the religious implications and the sheer incompetence of his civil administration.

Elevated beyond his abilities and lacking discipline, his reign tragically highlights the failure of despotic government without even the dubious safeguards that were implicit in the fabrication of the Augustan principate.

Marcus Julius Gessius Bassianus / Marcus Aurelius Severus Alexander

[Caesar from July 10, 221; Augustus March 6, 222 to March 235]

Alexianus was born in Arca Caesarea in Phoenicia on October 1, 208 (although some sources put the date three years earlier), the son of Gessius Marcianus, an *eques*, and of Julia Mamaea, niece of the then empress, Julia Domna, wife of Septimius Severus. Julia Mamaea was the antithesis of her flighty sister Soaemias, and so was Alexianus in comparison to his cousin Elagabalus. At his mother's insistence he was raised quietly and educated well, and had little if anything to do with the worship of the Emesene sun-god. When he was raised to the purple in March 222 he became Rome's youngest emperor, aged barely fourteen, and so the reins of government were in the hands of his mother and grandmother. However, Julia Maesa lived for only a short time after Alexander's elevation, after which Mamaea became the sole regent of her son and the empire. Her imperial title was *Mater Augusti Nostri et Castrorum et Senatus et Patriae*. Her position in the government was confirmed by the title *Consors Imperii*.

Herodian portrays the reign of Severus Alexander as a reaction not only against the profligate excesses of his cousin, but also as a rejection of the militaristic principles of Septimius Severus and Caracalla. In the Herodian picture, the ruler returns to something recognizable as an Augustan princeps, restoring to the senatorial order its ancient privileges, and favoring senators and the nobility over the *equites* and army. However, Herodian was the emperor's biographer and his assessment is clearly flattering. Unfortunately, the work of his contemporary, Dio Cassius, is largely missing for this period, so sensible comparison is not possible.

Maesa and Mamaea established a sixteen-man *consilium* of senators, which after the former's death may be regarded as Mamaea's government, until Alexander became old enough to take control. Since the *consilium* included the eminent jurists Ulpian and Paulus, it marked a return to sane government after Elagabalus, but hardly indicates a restoration of government by consent of the senate. That Ulpian was appointed to the office of praetorian prefect is used to argue a new precedence of senators over equestrians, the class that had usually filled the post. Under Alexander, the traditional incompatibility between the prefecture and membership of the senate was removed and henceforth the prefect could be styled *vir clarissimus* or still *vir eminentissimus*. Nevertheless, equestrian prefects did not

automatically become adlected into the senate as a result of the reform and indeed for the next fifty years the majority of prefects still belonged to the *ordo equester*. Since the time of Marcus Aurelius the designation of officials had been changing through the increase in bureaucracy and the blurring of roles previously only held by a senator at the higher level and an *eques* at the lower. The titles were peculiar to the official's rank, so the senator was styled as *vir clarissimus* (most distinguished gentleman) and the equestrian in the civil service as *vir egregius* (honorable gentleman). The title *vir eminentissimus* (eminent gentleman) belonged only to the praetorian prefect, always an *eques* who would have to give up the office if he were to be adlected into the senate. There had been notable exceptions, Sejanus in 31, Titus in the principate of Vespasian, and Plautianus in 203. Alexander's reform meant that the office could now be held either by an equestrian or by a senator.

Alexander, under his mother's tutelage, restored prestige to the senate and respected its members. But despite his biographer's claims, he did not hand back any powers that had been gradually removed from the senate through the principate or break with the Severan principle of administration through a *consilium* and centrally controlled civil service. If anything, Alexander's regulation of some political offices tightened the autocratic power of the emperor. So vanished from the Roman political sphere the offices of *tribunus plebis* and curule aedile from the senatorial *cursus honorum*. However, such offices had largely fallen into disuse as most of their functions were absorbed by the imperial bureaucracy, so this reform can be seen as more of an orderly tidying up of ancient Republican loose ends than an overt act of despotism.

For Rome and the empire, the first nine years of Alexander's reign were peaceful, as the realm recovered from the Elagabaline lack of care through Mamaea's meticulous government. In this she was aided by her son's complete devotion, which allowed for none of the discord that had marked earlier regencies. Two incidents marred the new order. Ulpian earned the displeasure of the praetorian guard for his unyieldingly strict command and, after an argument, some troops killed him in the emperor's palace. The other affected Alexander directly. In 225 Mamaea chose for him a bride named Sallustia Barbia Orbiana. She was from one of the few remaining genuinely patrician families, and her father Lucius Seius Sallustius was raised to the rank of Caesar. But Mamaea soon became jealous of the hold his new wife

had over her son and forced him to divorce and banish her in 227. At the same time Sallustius was accused of an attempt on Alexander's life and executed. There is no record that Alexander resented this interference in his married life and thereafter he remained single, and Mamaea returned to her supreme position.

The return to a degree of economic stability allowed Alexander to undertake several building projects. The huge baths of Caracalla were finished and the Neronian Baths complex in the Campus Martius was enlarged and renamed the Baths of Alexander. The last of Rome's eleven great aqueducts, the Aqua Alexandrina, was put into service in 226 to bring water to the heavily built on Campus Martius. Throughout Italy and the provinces further roads, bridges, and baths were constructed through a generous alleviation of taxes to communities involved in works of public utility. Most especially, Alexander concentrated resources on road building along the Danube frontier.

Foes on Either Side

Had his reign remained peaceful, Alexander Severus might have developed into a significant emperor, certainly in comparison with his immediate predecessors. But it was not to be, and in the following five years Alexander proved unequal to the major challenge of the time. With the constant pressure of barbarian tribes to the north and a reinvigorated Persia to the east, military skills more than domestic were the prime attribute of an emperor in the third century. Alexander's lack in this respect ultimately cost him his life.

The first great challenge appeared from Persia, where the Arsacid Parthian dynasty—Rome's most constant foe—was overthrown by the Sassanids. Even as he began mobilization, Alexander attempted to negotiate with Ardashir, the triumphant Sassanian king, a process that had usually worked before. But the Sassanians were very different opponents than had been the Parthians and all overtures were ignored.

Since the days of Alexander the Great the Parthians had been the dominant power in Persia. However, frequent debilitating wars with Rome weakened the ruling Arsacid dynasty, which under Artabanus V was finally toppled. Taking advantage, Ardashir (Artaxerxes), king of the neighboring tribe of Fars, who had subdued an area from the Persian Gulf to Isfahan, rebelled and proclaimed himself the restorer of the ancient Achemenid empire and true Zoroastrian faith. In 227 he invaded Parthia and overthrew Artabanus in battle on April 28 and assumed the title King of Kings, founding the Sassanian dynasty, named after his grandfather Sassan. The Sassanians were far more aggressive than the Parthians, who had only aspired to include Armenia within their boundaries. Ardashir's aims were to annex all of Asia Minor and eradicate Hellenistic culture from the region. It took three years for Ardashir to consolidate his position, so it was in 230 that news reached Rome that the Sassanians had overrun Mesopotamia, were threatening Syria, and had laid claim to all the land that had belonged to Darius as far west as the Aegean.

A new legion was raised (possibly IV Italica) and detachments from the Illyrian legions were readied to march toward the eastern frontier. Alexander and Mamaea left Rome for Antioch early in 231 to be joined there by the European army units. A last attempt to negotiate resulted in a curt response that Rome should immediately evacuate the territories that rightfully belonged to the Persian empire. The events of the campaign that followed remain unclear, although the

presence of the emperor leant additional weight to Roman policy, because early Sassanian successes were reversed. While the Romans met with severe losses, they also inflicted heavy casualties. The result was an acceptance of the status quo rather than any settlement. Mesopotamia was recovered, Ardashir made no further move for four years, and Alexander returned to Rome in 233 to celebrate a magnificent triumph.

The emperor's presence was now felt to be essential at the northern frontiers, where Germans had crossed the Rhine and Danube to take advantage of the troop reductions made for the Persian campaign. Indeed, this serious incursion may well have been another reason for concluding the war against Ardashir. Accordingly, Alexander and Mamaea left Rome for Moguntiacum early in 234 to meet advance detachments of the Illyrian legions returning hurriedly from Syria. Their haste was understandable. Alexander had followed Marcus Aurelius's policy of granting the officers and soldiers on the frontier parcels of land, on condition that they and their sons continued to serve in the legions. The German invasion, therefore, was threatening more than the empire; it was a personal threat to the soldiers' families and homes. This also goes a long way to explaining the troops' fury with Alexander when, as was customary with him, he preferred to negotiate with the barbarian invaders. Viewing his pacific policy at best as cowardice and at worst as outright betrayal, the troops began to seek a general who was not afraid to fight the invaders.

The common soldiery also despised the power that Mamaea exercised over her son, and her well-known favoritism toward the eastern legions. They wanted an emperor who was a western compatriot and chose Gaius Julius Verus Maximinus. A peasant of Thracian origin who had risen through the ranks because of his physical strength and soldierly abilities, he was in command of some Pannonian levies. In March 235, his soldiers invested him with the purple, and a few days later Alexander and Mamaea were murdered by their own soldiers at their camp near Moguntiacum. Thus came to an end the dynasty of the Severi.

INTO MILITARY ANARCHY

[AD 235–268]

Maximinus Thrax

Gaius Julius Verus Maximinus

[*Augustus March 235 to c. April 238*]

The accession of Maximinus marked the start of a fifty-year period of disorder in the Roman empire during which the militarization of the government inaugurated by Septimius Severus continued apace and the debasement of the currency brought the empire to bankruptcy. It was also a prelude to a series of revolutions that would culminate in the division of the empire under Gallienus only eighteen years later, the period that this chapter deals with. It opens on the death of Severus Alexander with the intertwined rules of five emperors, the longest reigning of whom was Maximinus, the first barbarian to ascend the throne of the Caesars.

Maximinus was born in about 173 in a village in Thracia (hence the derisory cognomen Thrax). He was a man who benefitted from the greater social mobility promoted by Septimius Severus. It was said that his family were peasants and that as a boy he was a shepherd. His Roman naming may have originated from Gaius Julius Maximinus, the governor of Dacia, under whom he served as a ranker in 208 and who granted him Roman citizenship. His enormous physical strength attracted the attention of Septimius Severus, who promoted Maximinus to the rank of centurion. By the reign of Severus Alexander he had reached equestrian rank and was entrusted with greater responsibilities. As war against the Germans loomed, Maximinus was placed in charge of training recently recruited levies of Pannonian troops. These young soldiers were fiercely loyal to Maximinus, whose four decades of harsh military service placed him in stark contrast to the young and indecisive Alexander. His position was similar to that of Macrinus: he was a lowly equestrian, not a senator, and owed his elevation entirely to the vote of his soldiers. Unlike Macrinus, he had never held a civil post or been a *legatus legionis*, let alone a praetorian, and his experience was entirely military.

We do not know how his elevation was reported to the senate, although some historical sources go so far as to suggest that Maximinus was the first to vindicate the right as opposed to the power

of the soldiers to make an emperor without reference to the senate. It hardly matters; the senate had become powerless to intervene in any such choice, and therefore bowed to the inevitable and conferred the imperial prerogatives.

The immediate and pressing concern was to prosecute the war against the Germans that Alexander had delayed with his attempts to buy peace. Although Alexander's closest advisors were dismissed or killed, Maximinus seems to have left members of the previous regime in positions of authority. This might seem a sensible policy, given that his humble background would make relations with the *equites* and senatorial order difficult. However, it meant that he faced retaliation from the Severan partisans. Almost immediately there were two mutinies. A number of centurions and officers of senatorial rank led the first. A pontoon bridge had been thrown across the Rhine ready for the campaign, and they planned to destroy this after Maximinus had crossed with his forces. Thus isolated on the wrong shore of the river, they intended to replace Maximinus by a consular called Magnus. But the plot was leaked and anyone suspected of being involved was put to death without trial. Osrhoenian archers who had accompanied Alexander from Syria were the ringleaders of the second revolt. They championed another consular and friend of Alexander Severus called Quartinus, and invested him with the purple. But an officer and supposed friend of the archers named Macedo treacherously betrayed them in order to curry favor with Maximinus. Macedo murdered Quartinus but received only contempt from the emperor, who in turn had him executed.

Maximinus decided to remove all officers of senatorial rank from the army and replace them with his own promoted men. From this point on, his reign was effectively a war against the nobility, which accomplished little beyond fattening the purses of the *delatores*. Having quelled two rebellions, Maximinus now crossed the Rhine and drove the German tribes back from the river to seek refuge in the dense forests. The Romans laid waste the farms and villages before retreating in safety for the winter. Maximinus intended a full-scale invasion in the following year, but was forestalled by unrest among the tribes across the Danube, and moved his headquarters from Moguntiacum to Sirmium. In 236 he named his son Maximus as Caesar and assumed the title of Germanicus Maximus. But by the spring of 238 he was still tied up at Sirmium when news of a serious rebellion in Africa reached him.

The spark that ignited trouble in Africa was largely the consequence of Maximinus's desperate need of money for the soldiers' pay and donatives. His procurator in Africa had begun confiscating wealthy landowners' property and some young nobles banded together and planned to assassinate the detested official. They armed their clients and the farmers who worked their properties, and then entered Thysdrus (El Djem, Tunisia), where they murdered the offending procurator and his bodyguard. The rebels then went to the aged proconsul of Africa, Gordianus (Gordian), and invited him to become emperor.

Gordian I

Marcus Antonius Gordianus Sempronianus Romanus Africanus

[Co-Augustus January 238, in Africa]

Gordian II

Marcus Antonius Gordianus Sempronianus Romanus Africanus

[Co-Augustus January 238, in Africa]

Gordian's background is cloudy. Since he was said to have been about eighty at the time of his accession, he was probably born in 159. On his father's side, he was descended from the powerful Gracchi who had dominated Roman affairs toward the end of the Republic, and on his mother's side from a relative of the emperor Trajan. His praenomen and nomen indicate that the family received Roman citizenship in the late Republic from Mark Antony, while the cognomen suggests a link to Asia Minor. Gordian was the father of at least two children: a son of the same name and a daughter, whose own son was to become the emperor Gordian III.

At the beginning of January 238, after some consideration of his options, Gordian consented and was proclaimed emperor. He left his home in Thysdrus and moved to Carthage where, after elevating his son to be his colleague, he sent an embassy to Rome to explain his actions. Members of this embassy had an imperative to first remove the praetorian prefect Vitallianus, who was an avid supporter of Maximinus, before presenting Gordian's case to the senate. In both undertakings they were successful: Vitallianus was assassinated and the senate gratefully recognized the eminent Gordianus and his son as the new joint-Augusti, and particularly approved of the proposed program of constitutional government. This included the abolition of Maximinus's hated *delatores* and a promise of a donative to the army. The senate declared Maximinus a public enemy and formed the *XX.VIR.EX.S.C. Rei Publicae Curandae*, or a commission of twenty, the members of which were assigned different parts of Italy, where they were to make preparations for the anticipated invasion of Maximinus.

Many of the provinces, with the exceptions of Dacia, Pannonia, and those of Hispania, allied with the Gordiani, but a threat developed in Africa itself. At some earlier point, Gordian had attempted to remove from office the peculating Capellianus, governor of Numidia, and now he rebelled. His strength lay in his command of the only regular troops stationed in the African provinces, legion III Augusta, whereas the Gordiani could only muster a local volunteer militia. When

Capellianus began an advance toward Carthage, Gordian sent his son to oppose him. Gordian's hastily recruited levies were no match for Roman soldiers, and they were soon overwhelmed and Gordian II was killed in the battle. On hearing of his son's death, the father committed suicide after a reign of just twenty-two days.

[21. Link to: Anarchy in the Empire](#)

Pupienus

Clodius Pupienus Maximus

[Co-Augustus early February 238 to early May 238, in Italy]

Balbinus

Decimus Caelius Calvinus Balbinus

[Co-Augustus early February 238 to early May 238, in Italy]

The reign of the two Gordiani may have been short, but its significance lies in the determination with which the senate set about immediately finding a replacement from among their own ranks to oppose the tyrant Maximinus. They chose two members of the commission of twenty to be the next Augusti. Pupienus was probably about sixty at the time of his elevation. Of humble origins, he had risen swiftly through the army ranks: *primus pilus*, *tribunus militum*, praetor, and proconsul of Bithynia, Achaea, Gaul Narbonensis, and Germania Superior. He had secured victories over the Sarmatae and the Germans, and held two suffect consulships (the last possibly in 234), as well as the office of urban prefect.

Of Balbinus, we know less. Better-born than his colleague, Balbinus was probably about the same age as Pupienus and a distinguished administrator. For this reason he was to remain in Rome while Pupienus took command of the Italian defenses.

Pupienus had earned a reputation for severity when he was urban prefect, which may explain his unpopularity with the mob, in spite of his widely praised governorship in Germania Superior. In addition, the creation of two emperors by the senate did not please the military—especially the praetorian guard, which viewed any resurgence of senatorial prerogatives with deep mistrust. As news of the election spread throughout Rome, rioting broke out, in part a reaction against Pupienus, but also probably a sign of the disappointment felt by both soldiers and civilians at the loss of Gordian money. Eventually a compromise was made, and in March 238 the senate reacquired Gordian wealth by promoting Gordian's grandson Marcus Antonius Gordianus to the rank of Caesar.

Meanwhile, Maximinus had commenced his advance toward Italy with detachments from the Illyrian army gathered for the intended invasion across the Danube. Things did not go well for him. The haste of departure meant that his army was poorly provisioned and already by the time it reached Emona (Ljubljana) the men were going hungry. But the deserted town had been stripped of any food, and the troops

grew mutinous. Maximinus pushed on toward Aquileia, anticipating an easy victory and victuals to satisfy his men. However, this too was denied him. Due to the energetic activities of Tullius Menophilus and Crispinus, two members of the commission of twenty, the town was prepared, the fortifications strengthened, and the gates barred. Maximinus faced a long siege without engines and with starving soldiers. Pupienus, having successfully raised more troops in Ravenna, was in his line of advance, preventing Maximinus from simply going around Aquileia. His men were at the end of their tether, and finally soldiers of II Parthica, who wanted to get home to their wives and children at Albanum near Rome, went to Maximinus's tent and murdered him and his son while they slept.

Their heads were sent first to Ravenna and then on to Rome. And so it was that Pupienus entered Aquileia without a fight. Maximinus's starving Pannonian troops were even prepared to acclaim an emperor appointed by the senate, so desperate was their need for food. For their part, the German allies were happy to recognize Pupienus, remembering in gratitude his earlier administration of Germania Superior, and the men of II Parthica were happy to be sent to their homes. Retaining a sizeable detachment of the Germans for his personal bodyguard, Pupienus sent the various elements of Maximinus's army back to their respective provinces and returned to Rome.

The new experiment of joint-Augusti worked well for only a few days before mutual suspicion began to plague the government of Balbinus and Pupienus. Their problems were exacerbated by continual popular unrest, especially among the praetorians, who hated being ruled by two emperors appointed by the nobility, and were fearful that the German bodyguard of Pupienus was intended to replace them. Within days the praetorians had worked up a head of steam and marched on the Palatine. Each emperor believed the other was behind a plot to assassinate him, and was thus unprepared and easily taken. When the German bodyguard rushed to rescue Pupienus, the captors murdered both emperors and left their bodies in the roadway. They then took young Gordianus and proclaimed him emperor. The experiment of senatorially elected emperors ended after only ninety-nine days, leaving the soldiers once again triumphantly in control of the election of a ruler—even though Gordian III was a boy of only thirteen years.

Gordian III

Marcus Antonius Gordianus

[Augustus May 238 to February 25, 244]

Gordian III was born in Rome on January 20, 225. His mother was a daughter of the senator Marcus Antonius Gordianus Sempronianus Romanus (Gordian I), but his father's name is not known and he probably died before the African uprising. History accords the early years of Gordian's five and a half-year reign little detail, probably because the thirteen-year-old's administration was in the hands of relatives or advisers. Pupienus and Balbinus were declared *damnatio memoriae*, otherwise it is likely that men who rose to prominence under the Severan and even late Antonine dynasties continued in office. Legion III Augusta, the African legion that had supported the rebellion of Capellianus, was disbanded in disgrace and its soldiers distributed among the German and Raetian armies. When the proconsul of Africa, Sabinianus, revolted in 240, the uprising was suppressed by the governor of Mauretania at the head of troops largely composed of auxiliaries. Meanwhile, on the northeastern frontier, a new threat had materialized when a large tribe of Goths entered Moesia Inferior. Early attempts to dislodge this warlike people appear to have been unsuccessful, and it took some three years before the situation improved.

In 241 a remarkable man was appointed to the office of praetorian prefect. Another beneficiary of the Severan democratization of the military, Gaius Furius Sabinus Aquila Timesitheus had risen through the ranks to the centuriate and then into the *ordo equester*. He had held an astonishing number of senior posts from Asia to Germania and Arabia to Gaul, often as a *propraetor* or substitute for a senatorial governor. He had served on the staff of Severus Alexander during the Persian campaign and on the Rhine before passing without incident to Maximinus as his procurator in Bithynia. He was procurator in Gaul Lugdunensis at the time of his recall to Rome to assist Gordian. Timesitheus's proven abilities quickly made him the central figure in Gordian's administration, and his authority was further enhanced by the marriage of his daughter, Furia Sabinia Tranquillina, to the young emperor in the summer of the same year. As to his character, the histories are silent; he was either possessed of extremely good fortune, or his career was the result of an unscrupulous nature. Whatever, for three years the Roman empire was under his fist.

Although the Gothic disturbances in Moesia Inferior remained a

running sore, the Sassanid Persian empire was again the bigger challenge facing Gordian. Already during the last months of Maximinus's reign the aging Ardashir I had captured Nisibis (Nusaybin) and Carrhae (Harran), and now his son Shapur I had invaded Syria and was threatening Antioch. The summer of 242 was spent completing the removal of the Goths along the Danube and securing the frontier before Gordian and Timesitheus set out for Syria. The protection of Moesia was left in the capable hands of Tullius Menophilus, the defender of Aquileia against Maximinus, who proved successful enough in containing another tribe of the region, the Carpi, that by spring 243 large detachments of the Illyrian legions were freed to start marching eastward to join Gordian.

The fighting commenced almost as soon as the reinforcements arrived, and the Roman army swept the Persians back. Antioch was saved, Carrhae and Nisibis were retaken and the Romans won a decisive victory at Rhesaena. Plans to continue the push to Ctesiphon faltered, however, when Timesitheus suddenly died of an illness during the winter of 243/44. Gordian was persuaded by the surviving prefect, Gaius Julius Priscus, to appoint his brother Marcus Julius Verus Philippus (Philip) as Timesitheus's successor, a change that was to have grave consequences for the nineteen-year-old emperor. Timesitheus had been content to exercise his power as Gordian's adviser, but it was soon clear that Philip's ambition was no less than gaining the purple for himself. According to the Sassanian version of events, the Romans now proceeded to march down the Euphrates and early in 244 met the Sassanid army near Misikhe (Fallujah, to the west of Baghdad). Shapur's forces were triumphant and he commemorated the victory with a giant rock-carving at Naqsh-e Rostam, which shows two Roman generals, one standing, one kneeling, bowing in submission before him. An inscription in three languages suggests that Gordian III was killed in the battle.

The Roman histories do not mention this battle, and it is accepted today that the two Romans represented are a defeated Philip (who almost certainly was not) and the later emperor Valerian, who would be captured by Shapur in 260. If the battle of Misikhe actually happened, it is not conceivable that the Romans were soundly defeated, because Philip was later able to negotiate terms with Shapur that left Rome hardly disadvantaged, which would not have been the case if Shapur's victory was as complete as his commemorative carving boasts. Indeed, Shapur was to remain quiet for another eight

years. Roman sources paint a different picture. Using the failure of essential grain supplies to arrive on time, Philip fomented a rebellion among the troops by blaming Gordian for their misfortune. The emperor was said to have pleaded with Philip to save him, even offering to resign and serve as Philip's Caesar. It was hardly sensible to have a possible rival in his court, and after the soldiers declared their desire to have a man and not "a child" as ruler, Philip had Gordian murdered. This happened at Zaitha, near Circesium, where a cenotaph was built indicating that the emperor died of natural causes; which is what the senate was told. The official dispatch also informed the senate of Philip's own proclamation by his army, and requested that Gordian III be deified—a sure way of deflecting blame for the emperor's death from himself, although many Romans continued to believe that he was responsible.

Philip I the Arab

Marcus Julius Verus Philippus

[Augustus February 25, 244 to September 249]

Philip II

Marcus Julius Severus Philippus

[Co-Augustus 247 to September 249]

Philip appears to spring into history fully formed; the only details of his early life are that he was born at some time early in the reign of Septimius Severus, possibly in 204, in a village approximately fifty-five miles to the south-southeast of Damascus in the Roman province of Arabia. How much Arabic blood Philip had is uncertain, since Roman soldiers, immigrants, and administrative staff had probably been inter-marrying in the region for many decades, but his origins were seized on by later historians for his nickname. We know where he was born (its modern name is Shahba') because he later endowed it as a colony and named it Philippopolis (not to be confused with the ancient town of the same name in Thracia).

Philip's father seems to have been a certain Julius Marinus and the family held citizenship, perhaps only from as recently as Caracalla's *Constitutio Antoniniana* of 212–13. Philip married Marcia Otacilia Severa and a son was born in about 238 called Marcus Julius Severus Philippus. Philip's older brother Julius Priscus was Timesitheus's praetorian colleague and, after the latter's untimely death, was influential in Philip's promotion to the vacant position. The fragmentary ancient sources tend to paint a dim picture of Philip as emperor, and may have glorified young Gordian by comparison. It is, therefore, predictable that they attribute Gordian's death to Philip as outlined in the previous section, and certainly it remained a popular belief among the nobility in Rome. But Philip's claim that Gordian died of natural causes—epidemics were rife among the troops in the east—may have been true; and certainly, he did not die of battle wounds as Shapur claimed.

It is equally predictable that the histories describe Philip's first act—a peace treaty with the Sassanians—as dishonorable to Rome. Yet examination of the terms reveals a different picture. Mesopotamia and Armenia Inferior remained under Roman control, a further indication that Shapur had won no great victory, since this settlement pushed him back from his earlier gains. Rome was disadvantaged in Armenia Superior simply in that its client king was only under nominal Roman

control, but this situation had often prevailed before. Philip made his brother Priscus governor of Mesopotamia, and raised his own son—about seven at the time—to the rank of Caesar before setting out for Rome. He arrived in the capital no later than July 23, 244, the date given for the discharge of veterans of II Parthica. His attitude toward the senate was polite and deferential, and he established relations that remained generally cordial throughout his reign.

Details of Philip's care of government are scanty and the picture must be created from the archaeological evidence. His closest advisers were drawn from among his own family. The command of Moesia and Macedonia went to his brother-in-law Severianus, and Priscus was advanced beyond the governorship of Mesopotamia, by a promotion to *praetorian prefect rectorque Orientis* (rector of the Orient), which effectively made him commander-in-chief of all the eastern legions—a position he was to abuse to his cost, and his brother's. In the provinces Philip's name appears on many milestones attesting to his maintenance of the roads and care for transportation, and evidently grateful provincials erected numerous dedications to him. In Rome the mob was kept happy with the distribution of three *congiaria*, and the water shortage in Trans Tiberim (Trastevere), the western part of Rome, was alleviated by the construction of a new reservoir. On the other hand, the almost continual state of war on the northern frontiers meant an increasingly onerous tax burden fell on all classes of the population. A petition sent to Philip for tax relief from the tenants of an imperial estate in Phrygia indicates that even the rural peasantry suffered.

In 245–46 the Carpi, successfully contained by Tullius Menophilus two years previously, again crossed the Danube and neither the efforts of Moesia Inferior's governor, Prastina Messalinus, nor his legate, Severianus, were able to check the invaders. Accordingly, the emperor left Rome to take charge of the situation. Fighting was widespread in the region and Philip was occupied there for two years. There is evidence that the barbarians stormed towns and cities in Thracia and Macedonia, and there must have been incursions of Germans in Pannonia, because the emperor assumed the title of Germanicus Maximus. At the end of 247 the Carpi were decisively beaten in open battle and sued for peace.

Philip returned to Rome to celebrate a great triumph before entering his third consulship, with his ten-year-old son as colleague for his second time. On April 21, 248 Philip commemorated Rome's

thousandth birthday with extravagant games and a *congiarium* to the people. It seemed as though peace and prosperity had returned, but once again it was an illusion.

[21. Repeat Link to: Anarchy in the Empire](#)

Revolt and Rebellion

News reached Rome in the early summer that the legions on the Danube had proclaimed one of their officers, Tiberius Claudius Marinus Pacatianus, as emperor. The tribes across the river profited from the confusion, and an alliance of Goths, Carpi, Peucini, and—recent arrivals—Asdingian Vandals swept into Moesia Inferior under the joint command of Argaithus and Gunthericus. The barbarians laid siege to the provincial capital of Marcianopolis, but due to the stout defenses of Menophilus and the bravery of the local commander, the alliance warriors were beaten off with such severe casualties that they abandoned the invasion.

At the same time, three more revolts erupted in the east and a fourth in the west. The eastern disturbances were largely the fault of the emperor's brother Priscus, whose harsh administration and bludgeoning taxation led to the proclamation by the soldiers in Cappadocia of a certain Iotapianus, who claimed to be connected to Alexander. Whether this referred to Severus Alexander via the Severan dynasty of Emesa or to Alexander the Great is not known (the latter may sound far-fetched, but the Julian Caesars had claimed descent from the gods). In Syria the pretender was Lucius Aurelius Sulpicius Uranus Antoninus, who was a great deal more successful than the others, since he maintained his power base until 253. The third eastern revolt by a certain Sponsianus is only indicated by coin inscriptions, which is also true of that in the west. A coin found in the region of modern-day Lorraine, dated to Philip's reign, claims a Marcus Silbannacus as *Imperator Augustus*. He may have been a commander of German auxiliaries in Germania Superior, and may be the defeated pretender in a civil war prosecuted by Philip's successor Decius, referred to by the historian Eutropius. Of Priscus, nothing more is heard after the outbreak of Iotapianus's revolt, leaving us to suppose that either he died naturally or was rightly a victim of the uprising he had caused.

Philip was so troubled by the rebellions of Pacatianus and Iotapianus that he offered to abdicate if the senate should desire it. None of the senators had an answer until Gaius Messius Quintus Decius, a suffect consul for 249, expressed the opinion that neither pretender was a fit man to rule Rome, and that in any case their own troops would solve the problem by killing them. In this Decius was quite correct, although why the rebelling soldiers turned on their choices is not known. Despite the removal of the chief usurpers, Philip

remained uneasy at the level of disaffection among the Illyrian legions, so he proposed to demote his brother-in-law Severianus from the command and send the reluctant Decius to take over. Decius, a gifted diplomat, appeared to be a sensible appointment, but for Philip it was a dangerous blunder. Through vigorous but fair discipline Decius soon had the mutinous troops back in line, ensured their loyalty by arranging for the salary arrears to be paid up, and led them successfully against the Goths on the lower Danube. What next occurred underlines how important it had become in this era for the legions to have their emperor in the field with them rather than in Rome. Impressed by their new commander, the soldiers proclaimed Decius emperor.

It seems that Decius had done nothing to create this situation and even wrote to Philip expressing his concern and offering to return to Rome to give up the insignia his troops had imposed on him. But Philip, distrusting his sincerity, left Rome under arms at the end of June, compelling Decius to detach a sufficiently large force and march toward Italy. The two armies met outside Verona at the end of September or the start of October 249 where a great battle was fought. Although outnumbered, the Illyrian soldiers were confident in the tactical superiority of Decius, and Philip was defeated. The emperor either died in battle or was later assassinated by his own troops. When news of the defeat reached Rome, the praetorian guard murdered Philip's young son. Neither was deified.

Fourth-century tradition claimed that Philip became the first Christian emperor. The source for this gossip was a report by Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea (c.260–c.340), the so-called Father of Church History, which stated that Philip was compelled to confess his sins before attending an Easter service. Eusebius also mentions as proof that Origen wrote to Philip and his wife. However, while Origen's epistle indicates the emperor's interest in the faith, it says nothing of his baptism. Neither contemporary Christian nor Roman literature mentions Philip's conversion, and it is unlikely that a man who had his father deified and elected his son to the office of *Pontifex Maximus* would be admitted to the Christian Church. Perhaps it is sufficient for the rumor to have taken hold that Philip was a religiously tolerant emperor and his successor Decius was not.

[Augustus September 249 to July 1, 251]

Philip's successor was born at the village of Budalia, near Sirmium in Pannonia Inferior to a provincial family, at some time between 190 and 201. His family may have been of Italian stock; his wife Herennia Cupressenia Etruscilla belonged to an ancient Italian family that had attained senatorial status. They had two sons, the elder called Herennius Etruscus and the younger known to history only as Hostilianus (Hostilian). His governorship of Moesia Inferior in 234–38 indicates that Decius achieved a senatorial rank early in his career. He was made urban prefect during Philip's reign, and he was a suffect consul in 249 when the emperor charged him with the responsibility of restoring order among the legions of Moesia Inferior, IV Flavia Felix, and XI Claudia Pia Fidelis, after the rebellion of Pacatianus.

Two historical documents suggest that Decius arrived in Rome in early October of 249: an edict issued by him on October 16 and an Egyptian papyrus of November 28 mentions Decius as emperor. The senate confirmed his position and in turn Decius assumed the name of Trajan, showing that Philip's faith in his diplomatic skills was not misplaced. This was shrewd propaganda indeed. By this time Trajan's status as the greatest emperor since Augustus was firmly established, and his adoption of the name was guaranteed to endear Decius to both the troops—especially those of the Illyrian provinces Trajan had commanded—and the senatorial order because of Trajan's reputation as a civil administrator.

Decius formulated a traditionalist approach to government and during a peaceful first year undertook much restoration and reform. He instituted a vigorous program of road-building, primarily along the Danube, but milestones in Hispania Tarraconensis, Britannia, Africa, and Syria show his care for all the major provinces. Rome enjoyed the first burst of public building for almost twenty years. Extensive repairs were made to the Colosseum, which had been left virtually unusable since the disastrous fire and the flooding in the reign of Macrinus, and new public baths were constructed along the Aventine hill.

However conservative Decius appeared, his rule was still autocratic, and he held the office of consul in every year of his reign. One of his more important administrative innovations was the creation of a special office that superficially resembled that of the Republican censor. Reviving a defunct but revered institution was

bound to appeal to the senatorial order, but it served another function in providing Decius with a powerful representative to take care of Rome whenever he was called to the frontier to repel barbarian invasions. His sons Herennius and Hostilian, whom he made Caesars respectively in September and December 250, were still too young to take responsibility in his absence. The man Decius appointed to the new office was a senator called Publius Licinius Valerianus (Valerian).

One of Valerian's functions was to help Decius revive veneration for the state-religion. For the first time the growing Christian communities throughout the empire, which had claimed converts at every level of society, became targets for persecution on the basis of religion rather than as a political expedient. During its centuries of expansion, the Roman State had remained tolerant of other creeds so long as their adherents were suitably reverent toward the state-religion, an adjunct of Roman politics. This was a condition that the monotheistic Christians were unable to accept. Decius's intention does not appear to have been to exterminate Christians so much as to have them return to the Roman fold through apostasy, for the state's part in the persecution was more passive than that of the people. In 248 popular fury against Christians had erupted into a pogrom in Alexandria, in which several hundred perished. Decius decreed that Christians must make a public sacrifice to the Roman gods, after which each was given a *libellus*, a certificate from a commission set up specially for the purpose in every town. Those who refused were arrested and held without food or water in the hope that they would recant. Nevertheless, far more Christians died at the hands of enraged citizens than by state execution.

Apostasies were numerous, but some Church leaders were ready for their martyrdom. The bishops of Jerusalem and Antioch, Alexander and Babylas, died in prison; the great theologian Origen was spared but later died from the effects of his torture, and in Rome Pope Fabian (236–50), the twenty-first Christian pontiff, was put to death on January 20, 250. The disorder in the sect that this caused is evidenced by the fact that the vacuum he left was only filled by his successor Cornelius midway through 251. Later Christian writers such as Eusebius, writing after the dreadful fourth-century persecutions of the emperor Diocletian, stigmatized Decius, but interestingly his edict does not seem to have been exclusively aimed at Christians. Surviving Egyptian *libelli* show that the language was generalized and directed at the whole population and, therefore, the effect it had on Christians

was not intended to be concerted.

In the summer of 250 there was barbarian activity on the Rhine and the Danube frontiers. Decius was successful in Raetia and Pannonia and so was his eldest son Herennius near Moguntiacum in the fall. But over the fierce winter the Goths crossed the frozen Danube and entered Moesia. Kniva, their chieftain, divided his force into two powerful armies, and one attempted to storm Novae (Svishtov, Bulgaria) but was driven off by Trebonianus Gallus, military commander of both provinces of Moesia. The two Gothic armies moved south, one to besiege Nicopolis, the other Philippopolis (Plovdiv). Decius and Herennius were able to relieve Nicopolis, but Philippopolis fell to the barbarians, who sacked it and massacred the inhabitants. Events are confused, but it appears that the Macedonian governor, Julius Valens Priscus, had allowed his garrison to elevate him to the purple in collusion with the Goths, after which he treacherously surrendered the city to the enemy and was allowed to leave with his troops. He was declared a public enemy by the senate, and probably survived Decius to be executed by his successor.

Events now moved toward their tragic conclusion. The emperor, in company with his son Herennius and Trebonianus Gallus, pursued the Goths around the region and finally engaged Kniva's forces on the first day of July 251 at Abrittus, some sixty miles north of Nicopolis. After initial successes in the battle, Decius was undone by the treachery of Gallus, who knowingly signaled the emperor forward into marshy ground, where his soldiers became bogged down and were easily slaughtered by the enemy. The bodies of Decius and Herennius were never recovered, although another source places the death of Herennius earlier outside Philippopolis, where he was slain by an arrow. Of all the short-reigning emperors of the first half of the period of military anarchy, Decius had ruled best and most wisely; it was for later Christian writers to blacken his name. And Decius enjoyed the dubious distinction of being the first Roman emperor to be killed fighting a foreign enemy.

Trebonianus Gallus

Gaius Vibius Trebonianus Gallus

[Augustus July 2, 251 to July 253]

Gaius Vibius Volusianus (Volusian)

[Co-Augustus November 251 to July 253]

Hostilianus (Hostilian)

[Co-Augustus August to November 251]

After the battle in which Decius perished, the troops readily proclaimed Gallus emperor. Concerned with reaching Rome quickly to consolidate his rule, Gallus signed a shameful treaty with the Goths. In return for their withdrawal they were permitted to keep their booty but—far worse—they were also allowed to take their Roman prisoners with them, many of noble rank; in addition he promised the payment of an annual tribute. Gallus then went to Rome, where—to lend credence to his story that the Decii had died honorably—he raised Decius's younger son Hostilian to the rank of Augustus, and elevated his own son Volusian to that of Caesar. And so began a reign of barely two years, notable only for misfortune.

The city was suffering from another outbreak of the plague that had wracked the empire for the past fifteen years, and Hostilian succumbed to the disease and died in November 251. Gallus then elevated Volusian to the position of co-emperor. In matters relating to the epidemic, Gallus acted decisively and gained popular support by providing proper burials for all plague victims, even for the proletariat. In all other matters he failed to take any serious action, beyond reviving the persecution of Christians, probably as a diversion for Rome's restless mob. This was most likely a half-hearted pogrom, since the only recorded victim was Pope Cornelius, who was imprisoned and died in the summer of 253.

The Sassanians attacked in 252 and overran Mesopotamia, defeated the Romans at Barbalissus (Mesken, Syria) and advanced as far as Antioch, which fell into Shapur's hands in the following year. Furious that the new governor of Moesia, Aemilius Aemilianus, had refused to pay the promised tribute, the Goths stormed back across the Danube, plundering the cities of the province and those of Thracia. A second band crossed from Europe into Asia and ravaged the country as far south as Ephesus. Gallus failed to react to any of these threats.

Aemilianus organized relief for the sacked cities, rallied his legions, renewed his men's confidence, and went on the offensive. His sudden

attack took the satiated Goths off their guard. Their scattered forces were herded back toward the Danube and, amid a great slaughter, hurled across the frontier. This unexpected success ensured a temporary peace, and the recovery of Roman prestige so impressed the soldiers that spontaneously they raised up Aemilianus and made the governor their emperor on the spot.

[21. Repeat Link to: Anarchy in the Empire](#)

Aemilianus

Marcus Aemilius Aemilianus

[claimant/Augustus c.May to early August 253]

The fragmentary sources give conflicting information on Aemilianus: that he was born on a small island off the western coast of what is now Tunisia, that he was a “Moor” or perhaps a “Libyan.” We are told on one hand that at the time of his death he was in his fortieth year and on the other that he was forty-seven, which puts his birth date somewhere between 207–14. Eutropius reckoned he was from an insignificant family, while John of Antioch claimed that Aemilianus used his [distinguished] ancestry to justify his seizure of the purple. From coins he issued we know that his wife was C. Cornelia Supra.

His coins also help to pinpoint the approximate dates of his three-month reign, which is sometimes put as being between July and September. Due to the difference between the commencement dates for the New Year in neighboring Dacia and Viminacium (Kostolac in Serbia), Aemilianus was able to issue coins for two Dacian years, but only one at Viminacium. Since the Dacian year began on July 20 and the Viminacian year ended August 31, and that his successor Valerian also issued a coin at Viminacium in the same year as Aemilianus, it puts his reign at ending some time after the end of July but not extending beyond the middle of August.

There is also a conflicting tale relating to his refusal to pay the Goths their tribute, which states that it was not a change of policy or an initiative of Aemilianus's, but a false allegation of the Goths to prise more money out of Moesia and Thracia. In any event, having defeated the Goths and assumed the purple, Aemilianus raised as strong a force as he could and advanced into Italy, hoping to catch Gallus and Volusian before they had time to prepare. Gallus sent orders to Valerian, who at this point was commanding the armies of Raetia and Noricum, to take detachments of his legions and come to his assistance. But before Valerian could reach Italy, Aemilianus had advanced to Interamna, within fifty miles of Rome. It seems doubtful that Aemilianus would have stripped Moesia of soldiers or that the legions would have allowed him to leave their homes undefended against a possible counterattack from the Goths, which implies that his force was not very large. This may have encouraged Gallus to take the field without Valerian's support, and a battle was fought at Interamna. His troops, who were not hardened fighters and despised their emperor's apathy, soon realized the danger they were in and

murdered Gallus and Volusian, then swore their allegiance to Aemilianus.

There is little more to say of the reign of Aemilius Aemilianus. On his defeat of Gallus it was already more than three-quarters through. It is not even certain that he had time to enter Rome, let alone make undertakings to the senate or receive the conferral of imperial powers. In Raetia, when Valerian's troops heard of the death of Gallus, they proclaimed their man emperor. News of the proclamation and the immediate arrival of Valerian at the head of a powerful and determined force prompted the Italian soldiers to rethink their position. According to the historian Zonaras, those who served with Aemilianus were weary of civil war and recognized that they would be no match for Valerian's troops. They also judged their emperor unworthy of the realm and—sure that Valerian was better suited for rule because he would assume affairs in a more authoritative fashion—they killed Aemilianus.

Valerian

Publius Licinius Valerianus

[Augustus .c.July 253 to June 260]

Gallienus

Publius Licinius Egnatius Gallienus

[Co-Augustus c.September 253; sole to June 260 to March 268]

The senate felt relief at the action of the Raetian troops in raising Valerian, because it avoided another civil war, and elevated one of their own number to the purple. In celebration, and to show goodwill toward the new emperor, the senate made his son Gallienus, who happened to be in the city, Caesar. On his arrival in the capital in the autumn of 253, Valerian received the imperial powers from the senate and raised Gallienus to the rank of co-Augustus, making him a partner in the empire.

In contrast with so many of his short-lived predecessors, Valerian came from an old Roman senatorial family. His date of birth is uncertain, but would have been during the reign of Septimius Severus, probably before 200. This is likely because he is first mentioned in 238 as a consular negotiating with the embassy sent by Gordian I to Rome to secure senatorial approval of his rebellion against Maximinus Thrax, and to have held a consulship much before his mid-thirties is unlikely. Valerian married Egnatia Mariniana and they had two sons, Gallienus and another Publius Licinius Valerianus. The marriage probably took place c.217, with the birth of Gallienus soon after in 218. Beyond his appointment by Decius to the reinstated role of censor in 251, Valerian's earlier career is unreported. In his turn, Gallienus married Julia Cornelia Salonina, and they had three sons: Publius Cornelius Licinius Valerianus (Valerian II), Publius Licinius Cornelius Saloninus Valerianus (Saloninus), and Licinius Egnatius Marinianus.

The two emperors enjoyed only a few months of peaceful administration in Rome before insurrections along the Rhine demanded their attention. The wisdom in making his mature son of thirty-six years a partner soon became clear. Valerian was able to remain in Rome while entrusting the defense of the frontier to Gallienus, who set off in the later months of 254. Commemorative coins point to his considerable success during the first three years of his command of the army, which was reinforced by detachments from Britannia—the first of a long series of military withdrawals from the

island province that would eventually leave it at the mercy of Saxon invaders. Victories were secured on the right bank of the Rhine, which prevented many German tribes from even reaching the river, while others were slaughtered as they attempted a crossing.

Gallienus also employed diplomacy and concluded a treaty with one German chieftain in a move to counteract the barbarians' numerical superiority, a tactic he would use in other parts of the empire. He is also credited with the massive strengthening of the Roman fortresses on the Rhine's left bank. Colonia Agrippina (Cologne) received a wall, repairs and extensions were made at Novaesium (Neuss), and a second line of defense was formed by making Antumnacum (Andernach) and Augusta Treverorum (Trier) into fortified garrison towns. However, some of these improvements may also have been the work of Marcus Cassianus Latinus Postumus (see below and the following chapter).

By 256 Valerian had concluded all the matters of state that had demanded his attention and determined to commence a campaign to regain Roman territory lost to the Sassanian empire by Trebonianus Gallus. Gallienus could look after western affairs, while Valerian concentrated on the eastern frontier. This is the moment when the historical sources first mention a real territorial division of the empire into West and East halves, with Gallienus initially ruler of the Western Roman empire. Gallienus may have envied his father's command of the East, for the pressures on him now mounted serially.

He made his eldest son, Valerian II, Caesar to share his burden. The Franks, a ferocious German tribe from the northeast of central Europe, broke through the northern *limes*, devastating Germania Inferior and Belgica before advancing as far south as Hispania Tarraconensis, where they destroyed Tarraco (Tarragona). The Franks then pushed further south to the narrow strait with North Africa and pillaged the coast of Mauretania Tingitana. Along the Raetian *limes* the Alamanni broke through in 258, overran the Agri Decumates, sacked the city of Aventicum (Avenches, Switzerland), and began extending their ravaging to the interior of Gaul, already reeling from the passing of the Franks. Either a second wave of Alamanni or the first force doubling back from Gaul then raided eastward through Raetia and attacked Italy itself by pouring through the Brenner Pass. This was the greatest horror of all. The militarized provinces of Germania Superior and Raetia had failed in protecting vulnerable Cisalpine Italy, with its wealthy cities and light garrisons. Making a stupendous effort,

Gallienus was able to mount a counterattack and won a victory over the Alamanni near Mediolanum (Milan). However, his triumph was marred by news of his son Valerian II's death somewhere along the Danube while he was campaigning there.

Gallienus then returned to the Rhine, but in the next year alarming news of a revolt in Pannonia meant he had to leave the defense of Gaul and Germania Superior in the hands of his second-in-command, Marcus Cassianus Latinius Postumus. His second son Saloninus, who had accompanied him to Gaul, was left at Colonia Agrippina under the care of the praetorian prefect Silvanus. The situation on the Danubian frontier was little better than in Gaul. Forces of Marcomanni, Sarmatae, and Quadi were attacking Pannonia, while the Goths and Carpi were threatening Dacia and Moesia. In this maelstrom of confusion and uncertainty the Pannonian and Moesian legions had proclaimed their commander Ingenuus emperor. By prompt action and the aid of a large cavalry force commanded by the brilliant general Aureolus, Gallienus crushed Ingenuus at Mursa (Osijek) on the banks of the Dravus in 259, but the remnants of his army continued in revolt by investing another officer, Regalianus, with the purple. Regalianus proved to be a tougher proposition than Ingenuus and it was not until 260 that Gallienus subdued the rebellion and restored unity in Illyricum. He then secured stability in the region by concluding an alliance with Attalus, king of the Marcomanni, ceding parts of Pannonia, apparently in return for the king's daughter Pipa as his concubine (he was still married to Cornelia Salonina, who almost certainly was not present at this arrangement).

Dishonor in Persia

Valerian left Rome and reached Antioch in 257, where advance detachments had wrested control of the city from the Sassanian garrison. However, Valerian was unable to immediately prosecute a war against Shapur because Anatolia was suffering its own series of barbarian assaults. These came from two fronts. In 257 a Scythian tribe called the Borani launched a seaborne raid across the Pontus Euxinus (Black Sea) on the small Roman outpost of Pityus. Their ships were supplied by the former Bosporan kingdom (modern Crimea), which had been a client and ally of Rome until the recent overthrow of its king, but was now compliant to the barbarians' demands. Although Pityus on the northeastern Euxine coast was beyond the bounds of the empire, the Romans had fortified the town years before and maintained a small garrison there. A first attack was driven back by its praetor, Successianus, for which he was rewarded with the office of praetorian prefect by Valerian. But a second raid succeeded in capturing and sacking Pityus, following which the Borani sailed to Trapezus (Trabzon), stormed and burned it to the ground after plundering and murdering its citizens. Laden with booty, the Borani seemed content to sail back home. The Goths, too, raided in boats down the western coast before landing and marching west around Byzantium, crossing the Propontis and capturing Chalcedon. They then moved on to Nicomedia, whose inhabitants had already taken flight.

Valerian divided his forces, sending one part to the relief of Byzantium under the command of an officer called Felix, while he marched to the relief of Bithynia. The army never reached its destination: in the region of Carrhae the plague struck and wiped out many of Valerian's soldiers. At this point he heard that Shapur was attacking Syria and once again threatening Antioch. Valerian turned back, but faced the reality that, lacking resources, he could no longer overcome his enemy.

Late in 259 or early in 260 he sent an embassy to Shapur to request an interview to discuss a settlement. Persian assurances were given and, trusting in Shapur's good faith, Valerian set out with only a small retinue for Edessa where the Sassanian king was holding court. So the story goes, Shapur arrested Valerian the minute he appeared and inflicted on him the ultimate humiliation by using the emperor of Rome as a human stepping-stool to assist him in mounting his horse. Valerian was led off in triumph to die in captivity. The exact date of

his death is not known, but he may have languished in prison for as much as two years. After his death Valerian's body was skinned and the grisly trophy displayed to show how Rome's prestige had been eclipsed. Decius had been Rome's first emperor to be killed by foreigners; now Valerian was the first to be taken prisoner.

The shock waves of this disaster were felt in every quarter of the empire, and sparked rebellions on a massive scale to which ultimately Gallienus, now the sole ruler, had no effective answer, and which prevented any attempt to rescue or avenge his father. The main cause of unrest was the fear that, with the senior emperor's death, the far-flung provinces of East and West were on their own. The troops needed the assurance of a strong man at the helm right there with them. On the Rhine Postumus was proclaimed emperor by the troops in 259, and in consequence Gallienus's son Saloninus and his praetorian prefect Silvanus were murdered. Within a year, this Imperium Gallorum was recognized by Germania Superior and Inferior, Raetia, Gaul, Hispania, and Britannia.

For the next eighteen months Gallienus fought an indecisive war against his former second-in-command, but mounting pressures along the Danube became the more urgent problem. The eastern provinces were now at the Persians' mercy. In quick succession Antioch was retaken, Tarsus captured, and then Caesarea (Kayseri) in Cappadocia. Since no help could be expected from Gallienus, who at the time was occupied in fighting Postumus, one of Valerian's senior administrators—Marcus Fulvius Macrianus—proposed his two sons to the dispirited Anatolian garrisons and they were proclaimed joint-Augusti by the troops. This new Asian empire was acknowledged throughout Anatolia and in Egypt, but it remained Roman in character. Unlike the empire of Postumus, which was to last for fourteen years, the empire of the Macriani did not survive long, falling no later than 262 to the new power in the east, the Palmyrenes, with the full consent of Gallienus (see the following chapter).

It is, perhaps, a tribute to Gallienus's pragmatism, as well as an indication of his limited resources, that he understood Postumus was in a better position to keep the barbarians out of Gaul than a distant emperor, and so left him alone to get on with the job. In any event, a return of the plague in 262 kept Gallienus busy in Rome, followed by another incursion of Goths in the Balkans, which necessitated his presence in eastern Europe. The invaders raided Macedonia and Thracia, and pushed as far south into Achaëa as Athens. It took until

late July to evict them, and Gallienus returned to Rome in September 262 to celebrate his *decennalia*. Although it included a spectacular procession involving all the classes, it was really a military pageant that underscored how much imperial power now depended on the goodwill of the soldiers.

Gallienus appears to have spent the years between 262–67 in Rome, leaving the defense of Italy and Illyricum in the hands of his senior officers. For the normally vigorous emperor, this uncharacteristic apathy points to a crisis of confidence, which is hardly surprising considering the palpable disintegration of the empire despite his every effort. However, he returned to his normal form when another invasion by the Goths ended the five-year holiday from war. The invaders—a branch of the Goths called the Heruli—had crossed the Pontus Euxinus (Black Sea) and, toward the end of 267, laid waste Roman territory at the mouth of the Danube. There was an early naval victory under the Byzantine admiral Venerianus, but it did not prevent the Goths from plundering Cyzicus and then crossing into Achaea, ravaging every town and settlement in their path.

As Gallienus gathered his army, the Goths took a westward circuit across Achaea, Epirus, Macedonia, and up into Moesia. Gallienus ordered the detachments of Byzantium and Thracia under the command of Marcianus to cut across the Gothic communications and prevent any retreat, while he laid his battle lines across their approach on the banks of the Nessus. In the resulting battle the Romans were supremely victorious and the Goths routed. However, the impending wholesale slaughter was abruptly halted by news of a revolt in Italy.

This was a terrible blow for the emperor, for the pretender was his stalwart cavalry general Aureolus, who had been entrusted with Italy's protection. Gallienus returned and managed to drive Aureolus into Mediolanum, and then laid siege to the city. But he was robbed of victory in the first months of 268 by treachery among his own officers. These included the praetorian prefect Heraclianus, the general Marcianus, the commander of the Dacian cavalry Crecopius, and two high-ranking career officers, Marcus Aurelius Claudius and Lucius Domitius Aurelianus (Aurelian). On the pretext of riding out with them to view some reported enemy movements, the conspirators fell on Gallienus and murdered him.

While ambition for power was an undoubted motive, it should be noted that the conspirators were all Illyrians, so in a sense this was not so much a dynastic change as a geopolitical one. In killing

Gallienus, they were substituting an Italian emperor of Hellenistic sympathies for one who was first a soldier and second a native of the region from which Rome's best troops were now recruited. For reasons that will be stated later, the winner of the throne was Marcus Aurelius Claudius.

[22. Link to: Valerian & Gallienus](#)

The Reforms of Gallienus

The Hellenizing influence that so disturbed the stern Illyrians seems contradictory to the war-like nature of Gallienus's reign. Yet he was different to the warrior-emperors of his era. Descended from ancient Roman aristocratic stock, he was of good education, well read, and interested in art and Hellenistic philosophy. Gallienus and his wife Salonina patronized a cultural movement conveniently referred to as the Gallienic Renaissance. The sculpture of this time indicates a revival of the classical Hellenistic form, with its echoes of other great artistic periods—Augustus and Hadrian, for instance. As Hadrian had done, Gallienus had himself appointed archon at Athens and was introduced to the Eleusinian Mysteries of the goddess Demeter.

Unlike his father Valerian, he showed tolerance toward Christians. Valerian had been persuaded by Marcus Macrianus that the ills besetting the empire in every quarter were aided by allowing Christians to turn people from the Roman gods, and in 257 he issued an edict to enforce recognition of Roman deities. However, this also allowed the higher clergy to worship Christ in the privacy of their own homes, extending the principle of syncretism to Christianity. A more severe ruling came in 258, promulgated in the eastern provinces. Under its provisions, recalcitrant clergy were executed, the property of senators and *equites* became confiscate, and tenants were sent to the mines. Gallienus reversed his father's harsh policy, established peace with the Church, and even restored to it property lost under Decius and his own father.

Gallienus continued the military reforms begun under Septimius Severus and completed the democratization of the army. Essentially opposed to the senatorial order, Severus had appointed equestrian prefects to command the legions he raised instead of the senatorial legates of the past, and preferred to use equestrian procurators instead of senatorial provincial governors. Gallienus went further and deprived senators of their ancient privilege of commanding legions. The senatorial rank of *legatus legionis* disappears from the records at this point, to be replaced by the equestrian *praefectus legionis*. Since this was the same title as the lesser rank of the camp commander, *praefectus [castrorum] legionis*, it was distinguished by the additional titles of *vir egregius*, or *agens vices legati*. In all probability the qualification for this office was to have held the post of *primus pilus* centurion twice. With the *legatus* the other senatorial officers in the legion, the *tribuni laticlavii* ("broad stripe" or senatorial military

tribunes) also disappeared. Under Gallienus the final barriers separating lower from higher command were abolished, and any man who attained the centuriate could now rise to the very highest levels of command.

At the start of his reign, Gallienus instituted a new title, the *protector lateris divini*, which was awarded to promising centurions. Recipients then entered the Staff College in Rome, the institution no doubt having been set up to counteract the lack of education among the centurions that increasing barbarization of the army had produced. Admittance to the protectorate soon became an essential step toward further promotion. Gallienus was also responsible for greater emphasis on cavalry. Romans had always gone to war on foot, with auxiliary cavalry support. The new fluid situation required armies fleeter of movement, although recognition that cavalry could never win a battle alone safeguarded the infantry's pre-eminent position for the time being. By 258 Gallienus had formed an independent cavalry unit based at Mediolanum under the command of the equestrian Aureolus. It was strategically positioned where it could be deployed to wherever it was needed in advance of the legions, and its importance can be seen in its equal standing with the praetorian guard. The cavalry played a significant role in Gallienus's battles and paved the way for the greater military reforms of Diocletian.

It is easy to understand that, while the senate had by increments come to depend utterly on the power of an emperor (and would always welcome the accession of one who appeared polite and sensible), the continuing loss of prestige and privilege made the order volatile in its loyalties. Time and again senators meekly bowed to the demands of the next warrior-emperor who gained the support of his troops. But what could the once-august body do to reverse the trend? The empire was in chaos; it was a time for strong-armed men to wield power, and despite his best intentions Gallienus was unequal to the task. The plague had wiped out whole communities, with a consequential reduction of income from taxes. To pay for the wars, he had debased the currency to such a point that his last mintings were only of billon. These coins, made from an alloy of tiny amounts of either gold or silver with a high proportion of base metal such as copper or bronze, were virtually worthless; the Roman State was bankrupt. And while Gallienus cannot be held to account for the ravages of plague, he certainly was blamed for the break-up of the provinces. By the end of his reign, the "Roman empire" consisted only

of Italy, Illyricum, and the recently recovered Raetia, with a tentative hold on the provinces of Africa.

In time for Gallienus's *decennalia* celebrations of 262, a certain Marcus Aurelius Victor had a splendid triple arch erected in honor of the emperor, replacing the ancient Porta Esquilina in the Servian Wall. Today only the central arch remains, trapped between crowding Renaissance buildings—a sad metaphor for a man who might have been among Rome's greatest middle-period imperial rulers, but who found himself caught between insuperable odds on every side.

IMPERIUM GALLORUM AND EMPIRES IN THE EAST

[AD 259–271]

Postumus

Marcus Cassianus Latinius Postumus

[*Usurper, Gaul, late 259 to January 269*]

Even before the reigns of Valerian and Gallienus the prestige the German legions had enjoyed during the early imperial period had been eclipsed by that of the Illyrian army. Barbarian incursions along the Danube in the mid-third century appear to have had a greater impact on the empire, but the reduced legions on the Rhine were facing no lesser threat in reality. The soldiers, almost all provincial Gauls, felt exposed to the enemy and neglected by Rome. The continued policy of favoring the eastern European frontier, they felt, impeded their defensive tasks. When Gallienus departed from Gaul to deal with the Pannonian revolt of Ingenuus in 259 at a time of terrible crisis, the Gallic legions turned to the best man on the spot and demanded he rule them.

Nothing is known of Postumus's life as a *privatus* beyond his appointment to the command of the German legions under Valerian. He was clearly a nationalistic Gallo-Roman of humble origins, whose distinguished military skills allowed him to rise through the ranks to become a *praefectus legionis*. As usual, the political and military imperatives were driven by petty motives. A quarrel seems to have broken out over booty taken from barbarians near Moguntiacum by Postumus's soldiers. When Postumus distributed the spoils between his men, the praetorian prefect Silvanus ordered him to surrender everything to himself and Gallienus's young son, the Caesar Saloninus, who was under the protection of Silvanus at Colonia Agrippina. The troops rebelled, proclaimed Postumus emperor, and marched on the city. At the threat of a siege, the town's garrison was obliged to hand over Saloninus and Silvanus, and both were put to death immediately.

The legions stationed in Germania Inferior and Superior were quick to endorse Postumus as emperor. And in the following year those western provinces most at threat from the barbarians acknowledged his rule: all of Gaul, Aquitania, the provinces of Hispania, Britannia, and Raetia, the last being held until its seizure in 268 by Aureolus as

part of his rebellion against Gallienus. Postumus reinvigorated the Roman will to drive out the various invaders, and a series of victories is commemorated by coins bearing legends such as *victoria Germanica* and *restituta orbis*. By 263 the Franks and Alamanni were crushed, and although the northern *limes* were lost, some of the Agri Decumates was retaken. The speed with which Postumus recovered the initiative is indicated by a coin minted for December 10, 261 showing that he had assumed the title Germanicus Maximus.

As has been related, Gallienus tried to avenge his son's murder and crush the usurper, but twice failed to do so. On the first occasion the failure seems to have been caused by the unusual carelessness of his cavalry commander Aureolus, the second when Gallienus was wounded by an arrow and had to break off the assault. Added to which, the revolt of the legions under the Macriani in Anatolia required his urgent attention. Thereafter, while never recognizing Postumus's *imperium*, Gallienus accepted the reality of the separate empire to his west. This position was undoubtedly made more acceptable because Postumus made no threatening moves to expand his territory, a reasonable policy that ironically may well have brought about his ultimate downfall. His avoidance of a confrontation with Rome even extended later to refusing an invitation by Aureolus to join his revolt against Gallienus. This may have been in pique at losing Raetia to Aureolus, but it seems more likely that Postumus's Gallic nationalism was a greater preoccupation than the loss of a small, mountainous, and difficult province, and he was happy to abandon Aureolus to his inevitable fate.

The administrative policies that Postumus pursued indicate that his intention was not to found a separate Gallic state completely independent of Rome but to create a form of collegiate structure that would eventually join forces with the other "empires" of Rome to counter the external threat on all borders. The concept was a forerunner of Diocletian's Tetrarchy of the fourth century. Far from being overtly Gallic in the old Celtic sense, Postumus assumed all the imperial powers and prerogatives of a Roman emperor, including the titles of *Pontifex Maximus* and *Pater Patriae*, and he set up independent consuls and a senate at Augusta Treverorum (Trier). Postumus held the consulship five times during his ten-year reign (259, 260, 261, 266 or 267, and 268) and—in the constitutional tradition of Augustus—renewed his *tribunicia potestas* annually from his accession.

Repairs to the ravages wrought by the barbarian raids were made,

and commerce revived. Rome's western provinces had suffered less than the rest of the empire in the internecine dynastic battles of recent years, and Spanish, British, and Gallic trading had remained for the most part undamaged. Recovery from the Frankish attacks was, therefore, readily accomplished, and commerce gave Postumus a currency far less debased than that of Gallienus. However, after 265 the joyous coinage suffered from a sudden deterioration of its silver content. The answer may lie in Postumus's refusal to march on Rome. His soldiers felt that only his recognition as the sole ruler of the Roman empire would legitimize their rebellion as well as provide them with the rewards they deserved. Paying increased donatives inevitably meant reducing the quality of the coins—and it was not enough to satisfy rapacious military pockets.

Laelianus

Ulpius Cornelius Laelianus

[Usurper, Gaul c.December 268]

Preparations to celebrate Postumus's *decennalia* at the end of the year were abruptly cut short by the rebellion of Ulpius Cornelius Laelianus at Moguntiacum (Mainz). No written or epigraphic evidence exists to inform of the office held by Laelianus, but many coins bearing his name and style (*imp.*) have been found. Since his proclamation took place at Moguntiacum and presumably with the approval of the local troops, he was either the *praefectus legionis* of XXII Primigenia stationed there or governor of Germania Superior. There clearly was disaffection for Postumus among the soldiers throughout the Gallic empire, as evidenced by the subsequent actions of his own men. However, Postumus led a force against the usurper and Laelianus was either killed in action or by the troops of Postumus afterward. Eager for fresh booty—there is a suggestion that Laelianus may have led a successful Transrhenane expedition against some barbarians—Postumus's troops prepared to sack Moguntiacum. When Postumus attempted to hold them back, his men's patience snapped and they killed him.

Marius

Marcus Aurelius Marius

[Usurper, Gaul c.December 268]

In place of Postumus the troops raised a simple soldier, Marius, to the purple. Almost nothing is known about him, beyond the legend that he was a blacksmith by trade, and was killed by a sword of his own manufacture. There is no possibility that the Treveran senate accorded him any honor because his reign lasted little longer than three days before he was in turn murdered. There is every possibility that this was not an attempt on the part of Marius to seize power, but rather the outcome of a confused attempt by one faction of soldiers to protect their own interests over those of another faction, probably that of the wealthy military commander Victorinus.

Victorinus

Marcus Piavonius Victorinus

[Usurper, Gaul 269 to 271]

Victorinus had been one of the military architects of Postumus's victories over the barbarian invaders, and had shared the consulship with the him in either 266–67 or 268. Having remained behind in

Augusta Treverorum while Postumus marched against Laelianus, when news reached the city of the Gallic emperor's death the garrison had little hesitation in electing Victorinus emperor in his place. Whether the troops of Marius thought twice about their choice and killed him or whether partisans of Victorinus in Moguntiacum did the deed remains a mystery. However, while the *imperium* of Victorinus was recognized throughout Gaul and in Britannia, the provinces of Hispania were swaying in their affections and refused to do so. He ignored the rebuttal since he had his mind set on the recovery of Raetia from Aureolus, but a campaign was never mounted because of problems further to the south. The successes of the new emperor of Rome, Claudius II Gothicus, had undermined faith in the Gallic empire to the point where the city of Augustodunum (Autun) revolted and asked Rome for help.

Victorinus was obliged to take his forces and besiege the city before any Roman aid could arrive. Augustodunum shut its gates and held out for seven months, praying for Roman help. But when it did finally arrive, it was a largely symbolic gesture. Claudius sent the *praefectus vigilum* of Rome, Julius Placidianus, with what was effectively a police force. However, perhaps fearing that his resources were insufficient to relieve Augustodunum, he did not cross the Rhône, but made camp near Cularo (later Gratianopolis, Grenoble) where he could protect Gaul Narbonensis and Italy. In 270 Augustodunum fell to Victorinus's forces and was plundered. Victorinus returned in triumph to the north and took up residence in Colonia Agrippina where, in early 271, his quartermaster Attitianus murdered him in what appears to have been a matter of private revenge. However, Victorinus's wealthy mother Victoria held sufficient authority among the troops to secure the succession for her nominee, the senatorial governor of Aquitania, Tetricus. But before outlining his imperial career it is necessary to backtrack slightly, and examine the scant evidence for another "emperor" of the period.

Domitianus

[Usurper, possibly Gaul a few weeks c.270–71]

One historical source identifies Domitianus as the general who defeated the Macriani in Illyricum, but this is to be doubted because of the better evidence of that man being Aureolus. Indeed, the very existence of Domitianus has been doubted, related only to the find of a single coin in France and long regarded as a modern forgery. However, the discovery of a second coin toward the end of 2003 in a field in Oxfordshire, England and authenticated by British Museum experts in February 2004, proves his historical reality.

That he aspired fully to the purple is evidenced by the two coins' common inscription: *IMP[erator] C[aesar] DOMITIANUS P[ius] FELIX AUG[ustus]*. However, there is confusion about where this short-lived would-be emperor actually reigned. Recent suggestions that his domain was Britannia (because one of the coins was found there) should be discounted. Trade between Gaul and Britannia remained largely unaffected by the upheavals of the Imperium Gallorum, and coinage would have traveled freely, no matter who had minted it. The Danube frontier and eastern Gaul have been suggested as more likely venues. Of these, the former seems less plausible, for the formidable Aurelian, on behalf of Claudius, was active throughout the whole region. It seems realistic, therefore, to attribute Domitianus to Gaul, and his rebellion one against Tetricus, to whom he probably fell some weeks after proclaiming himself.

Tetricus

Gaius Pius Esuvius Tetricus

[Usurper 271 to March 274]

Tetricus might have faced a serious threat from Aurelian, who had recently succeeded Claudius, but the new Roman emperor had his hands full with a Gothic invasion along the Danube (see chapter ten). Besides, with Raetia secure, the region of Narbonensis bounded by the Rhône and the Alps back in his hands thanks to Julius Placidianus, and with the defection of Hispania from the Gallo-Roman empire, Aurelian was content for the time being to leave well alone in the west. Although Tetricus was acclaimed in the north, he took the purple at Burdigala (Bordeaux) in spring of the same year and set out for Augusta Treverorum. On the way, his forces encountered a band of Franks who had broken through the frontier to profit from the murder of Victorinus, and Tetricus's small force overwhelmed and slaughtered

the invaders. After a further campaign along the Rhine, Tetricus returned in late 272 and established Augusta Treverorum as his capital, where he entered his second consulship in 273 and elevated his son Tetricus II to the rank of Caesar.

Tetricus followed the example of Postumus and made no threatening moves against Rome. While Aurelian was engaged with the Gothic wars, this pacific policy may have made sense, but having dealt with the Goths and defeated the short-lived empire of Palmyra, Aurelian returned to Rome from the eastern provinces in 273 and determined to reunite the empire under one ruler. The task that had so completely defeated Gallienus no longer looked so daunting. Tetricus had only maintained his position with difficulty. For one thing, Gaul and Britannia were again prey to barbarian raids across the frontier rivers and pirate attacks from the sea; for another the governor of one province, a certain Faustinus, had raised the banner of rebellion with the support of soldiers who were opposed to Tetricus's passive policy. And the common people were disillusioned with an emperor who could no longer guarantee their security. As Aurelian marched across the Alps, a reluctant Tetricus took the field together with his son. The two armies faced off against each other in the early spring of 274 near Cavillonum (Châlons-sur-Marne).

The story given in the histories is that, worn out by the pressures of government, Faustinus's insurrection, and the insubordinate attitude of his own troops, Tetricus had made arrangements to betray his army to Aurelian in return for the Roman emperor's protection. This account reflects the propaganda of the Aurelianic authors and is probably a classic example of the victor writing the history. Other fragments suggest that Tetricus—who had hardly been an unsuccessful ruler—remained resolute to the last and did not betray his soldiers. He did, however, lose the battle and he would thus have owed his life not to his suggested treachery, but rather to Aurelian's need to stabilize a new administration in the western part of the empire without fuss from the senate, who hailed Tetricus as one of their own. The two Tetrici were displayed in Rome during Aurelian's triumph, but whether for political or humanitarian reasons, or because he was simply keeping his side of the bargain, the emperor pardoned them. Tetricus was to end his life quietly in Italy, where he died at an advanced age at an unknown date. With him ended the Imperium Gallorum of Postumus.

[23. Link to: A Fragmented Empire](#)

The Macriani

Marcus Fulvius Macrianus

Titus Fulvius Iunius Macrianus

Titus Fulvius Iunius Quietus

[Claimants 260 to c.262 in Asia Minor]

The elder Macrianus was one of Valerian's most influential ministers, endowed with the official title of *Comes Sacrarum Largitionum et Praefectus Annonae*. This mouthful made him the most important man in the empire after the joint emperors, Valerian and Gallienus. He controlled the imperial finances, including all the mints, military finance, and in addition the grain supplies. When the capture and subsequent death of Valerian left the eastern provinces at the mercy of the Sassanian empire, Macrianus and Ballista, the praetorian prefect, gathered the remnants of the divided Roman forces at Samosata and deliberated on what to do next.

With his hands full in Gaul attempting to wrest the region from Postumus, it was clear that the eastern legions could expect no immediate help from Gallienus. Since Macrianus was elderly and frail, and Ballista—evidently an unusual paragon of virtue for the time—rejected the notion of power, at some point before September 17, 260 they decided to proclaim the two sons of Macrianus, Titus Quietus and Titus Macrianus, co-emperors. Given the elder Macrianus's eminent position and control over the war chest, there was little opposition from the troops over the elevation of his sons. The regime's other claim on the hearts of the beleaguered soldiers was a tremendous victory over Shapur's forces at Corycus in Cilicia engineered by Ballista that compelled the Sassanians to retire to the Euphrates.

In common with the Imperium Gallorum, this new Syrian state was entirely Roman in character, as numerous coins attest. However, unlike Postumus, Macrianus the elder was not content with their position in Syria and Asia and determined to commence a westward expansion with the aim of securing at least the Balkans. Leaving Quietus and Ballista in Syria, he took detachments of troops and set out in company with his eldest son to cross over into Europe. It is possible to see this strategy as a genuinely helpful move to protect the Balkans against barbarian incursions from the north, but it smacks much more of an opportunistic land-grab from the dominions of Gallienus, and this is certainly how the beleaguered emperor viewed it.

By this time Gallienus had abandoned his futile war against Postumus and, unwilling to cede any part of his grip on the Illyrian and Balkan provinces to another usurper, sent Aureolus to meet them (a sound reason for rejecting the unknown Domitianus as the man in command). The Syrian army met Aureolus and his powerful squadrons of cavalry in Illyricum or on the borders of Thracia, and in the battle both Macriani were killed. This success was empty while Quietus and Ballista still held Asia Minor, however, and it was out of the question to dispatch a Roman army to return the Macriani empire to the fold. In this crisis the eastern power of Palmyra became a valuable ally.

Odenath of Palmyra
Septimius Odaenathus

[ruled Palmyrene kingdom c.260 to c.267]

The state of Palmyra lay between Roman Syria and the Euphrates, and in Roman times it had grown wealthy on the lucrative trade route between Persia and the Mediterranean. It lay beyond the region effectively annexed to the Roman empire by Pompey in 63 BC. Indeed, the Palmyrenes were more closely bound to Parthia when Mark Antony tried to raid the city in 41 BC, and the Arsacid dynasty encouraged friendly relations between Ctesiphon and Palmyra. Yet thereafter, political ties with Rome grew increasingly strong. There is epigraphic evidence that during his trip to the eastern provinces in AD 18 that preceded his murder in Syria, Germanicus visited Palmyra in an administrative capacity. Trajan extended the road system to Palmyra and Hadrian gave it the privileges of a *libera* (a state free from taxation). Under Septimius Severus, Palmyra was raised to the status of a *colonia*. In all this, then, Palmyra had retained a degree of autonomy while nevertheless gravitating inexorably into the Roman orbit.

The advent of the Sassanid dynasty of Persians changed the balance of power in the region. The Palmyrenes, who supplied auxiliaries to the Roman army, came to see the impossibility of the Romans maintaining their eastern frontier. Not only were the more frequent wars generally unfavorable to Rome, but Sassanid ambitions for Palmyra meant the development of a Palmyrene defensive policy that was self-reliant. Odenath's father had attempted independence some years previously, but had been arrested by the governor of Syria and executed. Epigraphic evidence at Palmyra establishes Odenath's immediate ancestors to a time when the family must have received its citizenship from Septimius Severus. By 258 Odenath is recorded as a prince of Palmyra, with Roman titles such as *clarissimus* and *consularis*. These do not mean that he was a member of the Roman senate, less so a consul, but the honorifics reflect Roman recognition of his pre-eminent position in the Palmyrene administration. However, his devotion to Rome appears to have been qualified. One story relates how he sent a caravan laden with rich gifts to Shapur, seeking an alliance, but Shapur scorned the offerings and demanded complete subjection. Since Odenath claimed in his embassy that he had injured no Persian interests, the proposition was evidently made before his attack in retaliation for the capture of Valerian in 260. Clearly,

Odenath was weighing Rome against Persia and seeking independent advantage for Palmyra, not as a client of either empire.

In the crisis of 260, having been rejected by Shapur, Odenath threw in his lot with Rome. Proclaiming himself *rex*, he gathered an army from Syria and Arabia, and attacked the Persians after their capture of Valerian at Edessa with such severity that Shapur was driven back across the Euphrates, leaving booty and prisoners in Odenath's hands. To this point the Palmyrene king had acted on his own initiative, but far from earning the displeasure of Gallienus, the emperor decided to legitimize Odenath's position. With true Roman disdain for the title *rex*, Gallienus entrusted Odenath with the supreme command of all Roman forces in the East under the title *Dux Romanorum*. This politically astute move provided Gallienus with a proxy force to maintain Roman arms in the face of Shapur; but the first mission was the recovery of the empire of Macrianus. Odenath did not wait. By a mix of force and diplomacy, he detached most of the Syrian cities from Ballista, and then at the end of 261 or the start of 262 attacked the Macriani capital of Emesa. Ballista was killed in the fighting, and the townspeople assassinated Quietus shortly after.

By the gift of Gallienus and the force of his arms over Macrianus, Odenath had effectively made himself the undisputed ruler of the eastern part of the Roman empire, but in his political wisdom he refrained from making such an overt declaration. Furthermore, the emergence of a Palmyrene empire was likely to be opposed by the Sassanians, and without the force of full-scale, trained Roman legions, a convincing conquest of Persia was beyond him. Nevertheless, he could inflict some damage on the enemy, and proceeded to do so in 262 with an army composed of Roman legionaries from Anatolia, and cavalry and archers from his own kingdom. The campaign was attended by great success. Mesopotamia and much of Armenia were recovered, and the triumphant army took Nisibis and advanced unstoppably on Ctesiphon. However, Shapur's scattered armies recovered from the shocks and gathered to defend the capital. Unable to meet a concerted Persian attack, Odenath contented himself with looting the city's outskirts and retiring safely behind the re-established frontier. For his efforts in Rome's name Gallienus rewarded Odenath with the title *imperator*.

Despite enlarging Palmyrene interests beyond recognition, Odenath and his elder son by a previous marriage fell to the assassin's knife in 266–67, possibly at Emesa. Since the government fell into the hands

of his second wife Zenobia, whose very young son Vabalathus had been only second in line to the throne, it was inevitable that she should be accused of plotting to kill her husband and stepson. Whether she was behind the conspiracy or not, Zenobia was certainly the beneficiary of their deaths, and she did not possess her deceased husband's political caution when it came to dealing with Rome.

After his death, Odenath's Palmyrene title King of Kings and his Roman office *Corrector Totius Orientis* passed nominally to his young son Vabalathus, a child of between four to six years in age at the time, judging by portraits on the first issue of coins. But the real power lay with his formidable mother and regent, Zenobia. Gallienus may now have regretted his support for a regime that showed every indication of growing into a separate and dangerous new power in the East, for he refused to confirm Vabalathus in the titles he had granted Odenath. It was, of course, an empty gesture, since Gallienus had no practical means of enforcing any form of Roman sovereignty over Palmyra; and within a year he was dead. His successor, Claudius, continued the policy of refusing what Zenobia considered her son's right, but was too preoccupied with the Alamanni and Goths to intervene in Palmyrene affairs.

Anatolia, nominally regained by Gallienus after the defeat of the Macriani, had returned its allegiance to Rome, and with it Egypt. Zenobia took advantage of the wars in Europe to begin the expansion of Palmyra to incorporate the provinces of Asia Minor. In the winter of 268–69 she occupied Antioch. The evidence for this is that the city's mint, which had been producing coins in the name of the new emperor Claudius, issued coinage in the joint-names of Vabalathus and Claudius.

With Antioch secured, it was time for Egypt. The route lay due south through Arabia, and the Palmyrene army pushed forward to Bostra and then Philadelphia (Amman), as milestones commemorating Vabalathus testify. Command of the seventy thousand-strong army, which was comprised of Palmyrenes, Syrians, and barbarian contingents, was given to a certain Zabdas, and a pro-Palmyrene Egyptian called Timagenes contributed an allied force. Egypt was particularly vulnerable because the governor Probus was absent, commanding the Roman navy operating against a Gothic fleet in the Aegean (see the following chapter). After a hard battle, the Nile delta came under Zenobia's control.

However, the victory was not secure. Probus returned to his province, ejected the Palmyrene garrison, and attempted to cut Zenobia's lines of communication. This move proved disastrous. Timagenes, with his intimate knowledge of the country, was able to flank the Roman army and take it by surprise. To avoid his capture,

Probus committed suicide, and the Romans capitulated, allowing Zenobia to reoccupy Alexandria. Now the Alexandrian mint began issuing coins in common with those of Antioch. However, there is an interesting aspect to both these issues. One face of the Antiochene coins (it is hard to determine obverse from reverse) features the beardless young face of Vabalathus with the inscription *Vabalathvs.V.C.R. Im.D.R—Vir Clarissimus Rex Imperator Dux Romanum*, while the head of Claudius appears on the other. This feature suggests that Zenobia was still anxious to avoid an open breach with Rome, perhaps until she had consolidated her gains. The later Alexandrian coins are similar, except because of the date the Roman emperor's head has changed to Aurelian's. The reason for the latter is explained by the fact that, yet unready to tackle the Palmyrene problem, and perhaps wanting to put Zenobia off her guard, Aurelian made a concord with her and granted all the titles to her son that Gallienus had conferred on Odenath.

Zenobia returned to Antioch to prepare for the occupation of Anatolia. This undertaking had begun even before the Egyptian campaign, and by the beginning of 270 Cappadocia and Galatia were in her hands. The queen, however, was determined to expand the boundaries to the Aegean and Black Sea. But she was thwarted from taking much of Bithynia by the sterling efforts of its praetor, Vellius Macrinus, who fortified Nicaea, withstood the Palmyrene assault, and then retorted with a powerful counterattack that repelled Zenobia's army. Undeterred by this—as she thought—temporary setback, in the summer of 271 she assumed the title of Augusta and Vabalathus that of Augustus. This flagrantly advertised breach of the convention agreed with Aurelian was publicly flaunted on the coinage, and he would ignore it at peril to his reign. Aurelian's steady hand on the Italian government had returned stability, so the emperor prepared for war. At this point, it is time to return to the events of 268 outside Mediolanum, immediately after the murder of Gallienus by his own senior officers.

RESTORATION OF IMPERIAL UNITY

[AD 268–285]

Claudius II Gothicus

Marcus Aurelius Claudius

[Augustus March 268 to January 270]

By the end of Gallienus's reign, the Roman empire that his father Valerian had divided between them was riven. Powerful rival empires had sprung up: under Postumus in the West, under first the Macriani and then Palmyra in the East. In Italy, Illyricum, and the Balkans, Rome faced onslaughts from the Alamanni and Goths along the northeastern frontier and the Black Sea coast. And yet, within the space of seven years, the reassertion of Roman military ascendancy would be achieved. This extraordinary turn-around was due to three warrior-emperors, all natives of Illyricum, who drove the barbarians from the northern provinces and returned the independent empires of Gaul and Palmyra to Roman sovereignty. As a natural consequence of renewed stability and an improved confidence among the legions in their rulers, the number of local rebellions that had plagued Gallienus also declined in importance.

The officers who had connived at the death of Gallienus had already made their choice of successor, which had lain between the fifty-five-year-old Marcus Aurelius Claudius and, his junior by only two years, Lucius Domitius Aurelianus (Aurelian). The new emperor would need to calm the troops' uncertain temper, and because Aurelian was a noted disciplinarian, the decision went in favor of Claudius, a courteous man of milder disposition. However, the sudden news of Gallienus's death led to some mutinous muttering, and the soldiers were only placated by a donative of twenty gold *aurei* each. Claudius was then adopted without further opposition.

The first of the great Illyrians was born in Dalmatia on May 10, probably in 213 or 214. In keeping with many emperors of the later third century, the early life and career of Claudius is obscure. The *Historiae Augustae* further complicates the issue by offering legendary attributes to ennoble the emperor the author spuriously regarded as an ancestor of the first Christian ruler, Constantine the Great. Claudius is described as having fiery eyes, being tall in height, and strong enough to knock out the teeth of man or beast with a single punch.

The emperor Decius rewarded him after Claudius demonstrated his strength while wrestling another soldier in the Campus Martius. His ancestors were said to include the Trojan king Ilus and even Dardanus, son of the Greek father-of-gods Zeus and ancestor of the Trojan royal family. We can happily discard these delightful fabrications; the truth was assuredly more prosaic. He was most likely of modest circumstances, and the Illyrian background suggests a military career, with slight evidence to indicate service in the cavalry under Aureolus.

Claudius faced a perilous situation, and it is to his credit that he put aside restitution of the empire and concentrated on ridding Italy of the Alamanni and the Balkans of the Goths. He turned first, however, to the two most immediate requirements: Aureolus, the rebellious *magister equitum*, and the senate in Rome. The fate of Aureolus was speedily settled. Having heard of the emperor's death, he surrendered on terms, but was executed shortly after, probably to appease the resentment of Gallienus's soldiers. The senate welcomed the removal of Gallienus to such an extent that only a firm dispatch from Claudius prevented the persecution of his relatives and supporters. Unfortunately, the third son of Gallienus, Licinius Egnatius Marinius, who was one of the ordinary consuls in 268, may have been murdered together with Gallienus's brother Publius Licinius Valerianus before Claudius's edict reached Rome. The senate recognized Claudius and acceded to his directive to deify Gallienus.

The Alamanni, having already invaded Raetia in the confusion that followed Aureolus's bid for the purple, had penetrated unopposed into Italy through the Brenner Pass earlier in the year, because Gallienus had denuded the region of troops to fight the Goths at Nessus. Through a series of rash decisions by their commanders, the Roman cavalry sent forward to oppose the barbarian advance was defeated. Claudius deposed the unsuccessful *duces* and appointed Aurelian as *dux equitum*. Claudius advanced with his legions to meet the Alamanni host on the shore of Lacus Benacus (Garda) in November. With approximately thirty-five thousand soldiers, he faced upward of a hundred thousand enemies. No details of this great battle have survived, but the reinvigorated Romans were the supreme victors. More than half of the Alamanni army was captured or slain, and the remnant fled back into the wilds of a Raetia largely abandoned by Rome.

Claudius entered Rome a hero with his assumed title of Germanicus Maximus, and a grateful senate conferred on him the constitutional

imperial powers. He announced his intention to become one of the consuls for 269, and then turned to matters of state. Following their defeat at the hands of Gallienus, the Goths had renewed their attacks on the Balkans, and in larger numbers than before. This represented a far greater threat than that of the Imperium Gallorum of Postumus. It is probable that, after Postumus's death, Hispania broke off its allegiance and, with open rebellion in Gaul at Augustodunum, Claudius felt he could safely leave the rival state to self-destruct. As we have seen, he contented himself with sending a small police force to guard eastern Narbonensis under Julius Placidianus, commander of the *vigiles*, and prepared to oppose the Goths, setting out for Illyricum in the spring of 269.

The Goths had launched their attack from the Palus Maeotis (Sea of Azov) in the summer of 268 in a fleet of ships said to have numbered two thousand, which had been built with the assistance of their neighboring tribe, the Heruli, transporting a host of three hundred and twenty thousand men. The first targets were the cities of the Moesian Euxine coast, but these proved to be difficult to capture. After failing at Tomi, Odessus, and Marcianopolis, then Byzantium and Cyzicus, and losing many ships in a bad storm, the Goths sailed through the Hellespont into the Aegean. After making repairs, the fleet sailed around Chalcidice and laid siege to Potidaea and Cassandria. On hearing that the Roman army was marching toward them, the Goths then raised the two sieges and changed their campaign plan by dividing into two armies.

The larger group abandoned the fleet to march overland, intent on reaching the Danube and eventual safety in their own lands. The smaller group was to sail around the Aegean, ravaging the island and coastal cities before returning to the Black Sea and sailing home. This naval contingent was thwarted by poor intelligence of the region, and met with little success against the cities' strong fortifications. Claudius ordered the governor of Egypt, Tenagino Probus, to command the Roman fleet, and he eventually drove off the Gothic ships. It was at this time that Zenobia took advantage of his absence from Alexandria to launch the Palmyrene attack on Egypt, related in the previous chapter.

To meet the challenge on land, Claudius devised a strategy intended to surround the Goths. He posted Aurelianus and the cavalry on the border of Macedonia to prevent the Goths from plundering Illyricum, while he commanded the infantry blocking the road to the

Danube. The strategy succeeded, and in a preliminary battle near Doberus in Pelagonia (northern Macedonia), Aurelian's Dalmatian horsemen killed three thousand Goths. The main engagement was decided at Naissus (Nis) in Moesia. The superior numbers of Goths at first pressed the Roman foot back, but they were ill-disciplined and unprepared for a wholly typical Roman flanking tactic. The Romans inflicted such heavy losses—a reported fifty thousand dead—that the barbarians began a retreat in the direction from which they had come. Claudius had no intention of letting the enemy escape and they were harassed every foot of the way. Eventually, forced into the hilly region of Haemus (Balkan Mountains), the Goths were surrounded. Some were captured, others surrendered, and of these some were pressed into Roman service in the *auxilia*, while more were settled on farms as *coloni*. In doing this, Claudius was following in the precedent of Marcus Aurelius and also anticipating later Roman policy; a practical solution in the face of the depopulation of the land caused by the plague. For the success of this campaign, Claudius added Gothicus to his nomenclature.

The short reign of Claudius and his lack of economic resources meant he was unable to accomplish much in his civil administration. Gallienus had so debased the coinage that even had he the time away from his military duties, Claudius could not have undertaken any immediate fiscal reconstruction. He made no significant alterations to the reforms of Gallienus, and granted no extra privileges to the senate. Nevertheless, he was courteous toward senators and maintained good relations with them throughout the barely twenty-two months of his reign. As he was concluding the war against the Goths, Claudius was informed that Vandals were massing on the Danube opposite Pannonia and the Juthungi, former allies of Rome, were threatening Raetia. So, leaving Aurelian in command at Haemus, he went to Sirmium to take charge of the defenses, and it was there in January 270 that he succumbed to the plague that had broken out among the defeated Goths and spread to the Roman troops.

Genuinely mourned by soldiers and senate, he was deified, and the senate had his golden statue erected in front of the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus and a silver statue set on a column on the Rostra in the Forum Romanum. His reign was also commemorated on a gold portrait-shield in the senate house.

Quintillus

Marcus Aurelius Claudius Quintillus

[Augustus c. February to c. May 270]

On leaving Italy, Claudius had left his brother Quintillus in command of the troops concentrated at Aquileia. When news of the emperor's death reached them there the troops proclaimed Quintillus emperor. Eutropius describes Quintillus as "a man of singular moderation and grace, and comparable or even preferable to his brother...chosen emperor by the soldiers, and, with the agreement of the senate, named Augustus." It is probable that the senate preferred Quintillus above Aurelian, the natural warrior-successor to Claudius, whose uncertain temper they feared. However, Quintillus was not an improvement over his brother in military matters. Aurelian swiftly finished the war against the remaining Goths attempting to escape Haemus to return to their homes across the Danube, and then moved to Sirmium, where he was proclaimed emperor by the legions of Claudius.

Clearly bewildered by this turn of events, Quintillus made no move to counter the usurpation of his imperial powers and consequently his soldiers deserted him. According to one source, having learned of Aurelian's ascendancy and having failed in an attempt to turn his troops against Aurelian, he found himself abandoned and committed suicide by opening his veins on the twentieth day of his reign. The various historical sources give conflicting times for the length of Quintillus's reign, from seventeen to seventy-seven days. It is hard to credit that he received the conferral of imperial powers from the senate in Rome and had time to order the issue of coins in his name in Claudius's mints as far apart as Rome, Mediolanum, and Cyzicus all within the space of seventeen days. Nor is it possible to credit Aurelian with concluding the war against the Goths and transferring to Sirmium in the same space of time. Therefore, the longest time given for the reign of Quintillus seems most probable. In any event, he contributed nothing, and by far the better man was now sole ruler of the still-fragmented Roman empire.

Aurelian

Lucius Domitius Aurelianus

[Augustus c.May 270 to c.October 275]

According to only two historic sources, the *Epitome de Caesaribus* and Zosimus, Aurelian faced two rebellions at the outset of his reign. A third, that of Domitianus, has been dealt with earlier, and almost certainly did not concern Aurelian. Septimius (or Septiminus) declared himself emperor, probably in Dalmatia, and a certain Urbanus did the same, probably also in Dalmatia. These revolts were another example of local commanders taking matters into their own hands in response to real or imagined threats from the Gothic invasion that Aurelian had largely quelled. In both cases, the usurpers were soon killed by their own troops, and some modern historians have identified Urbanus as a fiction. In any event, neither rebellion had any significant effect on Aurelian's accession in his fifty-sixth year.

Aurelian was born on September 9, 214 or 215 in Sirmium (Mitrovica). His father was a *colonus* (tenant) of a senator named Aurelius, from whom he took his cognomen, although whether he was adopted or simply attached the name himself at a later date is not known. Like his fellow Illyrian and colleague Claudius, Aurelian's was a military career; and he may also have served under Aureolus as a *dux equitum* (cavalry commander). Aurelian married Ulpia Severina and she bore him a daughter. In the fall of 274, Ulpia was granted the title Augusta and the Severan styles *Mater Castrorum et Senatus et Patriae*.

Dates generally given for Aurelian's accession are confused by events of the time. At a later date, Aurelian himself placed his *dies imperii* on the day of Claudius's death, but this was a ploy to dismiss Quintillus as a mere usurper. The month of May is most likely, which would allow time for the campaign against the Juthungi during the summer, and accord with his arrival at Rome in the winter in time to take up his first consulship in January 271. This also agrees with his first piece of administrative business, the concord with Zenobia, which led to the issue of the double-headed Alexandrian coins of Vabalathus. Aurelian's first task was the subjugation of the Juthungi that his sudden death had denied Claudius. The barbarians had already crossed the Alps into Italy and enriched themselves with booty from several sacked towns. As Aurelian approached they retreated but were intercepted in Raetia, where the Romans defeated them in battle and pursued them across the upper Danube. The Juthungi sued for peace

and a renewal of their status as friends and allies of Rome, but Aurelian refused them, granting only the right to return in safety to their own territories.

He then hastened to Rome where the senate conferred on him the imperial powers without delay. The question of Zenobia and Palmyra was paramount, but Aurelian knew that the army was weary of continual warfare, and reorganization would be required before he could take to the field in the breakaway eastern provinces. He therefore concluded the agreement with Zenobia related in the previous chapter, and granted Vabalathus the titles Gallienus had given to his father Odenath. It was an expedient that in appearance maintained Rome's sovereignty in the East, but there was no doubt that it also enhanced the real power of Zenobia and Vabalathus, who held Egypt and much of Asia Minor. Over the Imperium Gallorum Aurelian followed Claudius's example, since signs of a worsening internal situation there were evident, and left it to its own disruption. This left him free to attend to urgent civil administrative tasks, among them the closure of the Roman mint because of the peculation of its officials. This was probably intended as the first step in a total reform of the financial administration, but any further work was halted by a Vandal invasion of Pannonia.

Aurelian ordered the governors of the two provinces to gather all food supplies and deny the barbarians provisions, which had the desired effect of slowing down their advance. As soon as Aurelian arrived in Pannonia, he attacked the Vandal force, inflicting a severe defeat. When the Vandal chieftains sued for peace terms, Aurelian deferred the decision to the troops, recognizing the soundness of a policy that would ensure the army's full support for his rule. The vote was for peace, and terms were arranged that allowed for the Vandals to return home, with a supply of food while they were on Roman soil. In return, Aurelian took hostage the two chieftains' sons and gained a unit of two thousand horsemen as auxiliaries. These men soon proved their new loyalty and usefulness when an isolated band of some five hundred broke away from the main body of retiring Vandals and made raids on nearby settlements. The Romano-Vandal cavalry was sent in pursuit, rounded up the outlaws, and killed them to the last man.

Aurelian was prevented from celebrating the Vandal peace in Rome because a far more dangerous situation had developed in Italy. The rebuffed Juthungi had made an alliance with the Marcomanni and

Alamanni and swept down through the Brenner Pass as far south as Placentia (Piacenza) on the Po. Aurelian advanced to a position between Mediolanum and the river to the north of the barbarians, intending to cut off their line of retreat. Instead, the Roman army fell into an ambush set up by detachments of the allied Germans, and the emperor suffered his first defeat. The Roman forces were scattered, leading to wild rumors that the empire was lost. In Rome laborers thrown out of work by the closure of the mint rebelled under the leadership of the procurator Felicissimus. They were also encouraged by elements in the senate, who saw Aurelian's defeat at Placentia as evidence that his authority was at an end.

This was far from being the case. The ill-disciplined barbarians failed to follow up on their victory and, instead of pursuing the disordered detachments of the Roman army, they split into separate bands to plunder the rich countryside. Aurelian reformed his legions and began dealing with each band in detail. Two battles were fought near Ticinum (Pavia) at Fanum Fortunae in which the Germans were completely defeated and most of the host lost their lives. The few that succeeded in escaping north were allowed to flee; Aurelian had more vital matters to settle in Rome. He returned to the capital in anger, rapidly rounded up those senators who had suggested opposing his authority, and either confiscated their estates or had them executed. The rebellious mint-workers retreated to the Caelian hill and blockaded themselves inside the imperial mint, prepared to resist. But it was a hopeless cause against the skill of Aurelian's soldiers. In the resulting skirmish, thousands were wounded or killed, and their leader Felicissimus was executed on the spot. The surviving engravers were exiled to Serdica (Sofia), which no doubt accounts for the improved quality of minting there.

With peace restored in Rome, Aurelian began work on the massive monument for which history best knows his name, the Aurelian Wall. After consultation with the senate, work began in 271 to enclose the fourteen districts of the city first laid out by Augustus, including the previously unfortified district of Transtiberim (Trastevere) across the Tiber. The city had long outgrown the ancient Servian Wall, which had been allowed to fall largely into ruin by the mid-third century, much of its fabric looted for other buildings. The construction of this new wall was tantamount to admitting the future inability of Roman forces to prevent barbarians raiding into Italy and being capable of reaching as far south as the capital. In consequence several other cities

also received new fortifications or had older ones refurbished.

24. [Link to: Restitutor Orbis](#)

The Reduction of Palmyra

When, in the summer of 271, Zenobia assumed the title of Augusta and her son Vabalathus that of Augustus, Aurelian determined to return the eastern provinces to central Roman sovereignty. He anticipated little opposition in Asia Minor and Egypt, but expected that oriental Syria and Zenobia's heartland would be a tougher nut to crack. He decided on a double-campaign of encirclement, and designated a senior member of his staff, Marcus Aurelius Probus (not a relative of the defeated Egyptian governor), with the conquest of Egypt, while the emperor commanded the second army, whose objectives were first to retake Asia Minor and then northern Syria. Probus sailed first and encountered little resistance in the fall of 271 because Zenobia had decided to concentrate her army in Syria, and the Egyptian population was mostly pro-Roman. Aurelian left Rome at about the same time to concentrate the expeditionary force in Illyricum. This was formed from detachments of the legions of Raetia, Noricum, Pannonia, and Moesia, supported by Dalmatian cavalry and other auxiliary contingents. His progress was delayed by an incursion of Goths into Moesia, but these were quickly overcome, and the army marched to Byzantium and then into Asia.

Since Zenobia had failed to secure Bithynia and her hold on Galatia had been at best tentative, Roman progress across Anatolia was swift and unopposed. The first opposition came at Tyana, a town guarding the passes through the Taurus Mountains. Infuriated by its inhabitants' resistance, Aurelian promised his troops that when it was taken, they could sack the town and take all the booty that could be gathered. With the treacherous help of a local, some of Aurelian's men were able to work their way up and occupy a hill overlooking the walls, from which position the artillery soon persuaded Tyana to capitulate. Aurelian now reconsidered his promise and restrained his soldiers from plundering, and the town was spared. If the army was disgruntled at this change of heart, the victors were soon pleased to find city after city surrendering without resistance as news of Aurelian's clement policy spread.

With the willing submission of Cilicia, the way lay open to press on toward Antioch, where the main body of the Palmyrene force under Zabdas was stationed. This was protected by heavy cavalry and infantry units posted along the banks of the Orontes to the north of the city. Aurelian now showed his flair for shrewd tactics by using his lightly armed Dalmatian horsemen to engage their heavily armored

opponents, but then to retire when attacked and wait for the heat of the sun to wear down the Palmyrenes. The repeated tactic worked, and the exhausted Palmyrene advance guard was completely defeated.

It was really only a skirmish, but Antioch was cut off from Palmyra and Zenobia decided to abandon the city and withdraw to Apamea. Zabdas considered that their position was still dangerous, so the Palmyrenes fell farther back on Emesa. They were only allowed a short breathing space while Aurelian settled matters in Antioch before the Roman army went in pursuit. After a short and decisive skirmish with a Palmyrene rearguard left at Daphne on the outskirts of Antioch, Aurelian passed through Apamea, Larissa, and Arethusa, which opened their gates to him, and came face to face with the Palmyrene army of some seventy thousand outside Emesa. Here, the tactics that had worked so well at Antioch almost brought disaster on the Romans, but seeing that his light cavalry was being overwhelmed, Aurelian sent in the heavy Roman legions against the Palmyrene light infantry. The power-shock of massed Roman foot had rarely been bested in open battle, and it was no different at Emesa. The Palmyrene army was routed and the legions wheeled around to attack the enemy's heavy cavalry in its rear. Caught between the legions behind them and the reinvigorated Dalmatian horsemen to the front, the Palmyrene casualties were enormous. Zenobia and Zabdas retreated across the Syrian desert to Palmyra and prepared for a siege while they anticipated reinforcements from the Sassanians, with whom she had made a deal.

This was a nervous time for the besieging Romans. With Palmyra lying eighty miles from Emesa and surrounded by desert tribes fiercely loyal to Zenobia, Aurelian was concerned about his thin and vulnerable line of communication to the coast. In addition, he was worried about the possibility of Sassanian intervention. In the course of the siege Aurelian was wounded, and his men began to suffer from the summer heat and poor food. However, a flurry of diplomatic activity and the promise of financial reward eventually persuaded the nomadic tribesmen to switch allegiance. With the tables turned, the Romans had secure lines of communication and Palmyra was cut off. Starvation in the city was soon apparent and capitulation seemed inevitable, when Zenobia made a breakout and fled for Persia in mid-272. She was captured on the banks of the Euphrates by a cavalry detachment sent in pursuit and brought before the emperor. He received the queen politely, and waited for Palmyra to open its gates,

which it soon did. Again, Aurelian forbade any plundering by the victorious troops, content with the capture of Zenobia, Vabalathus and the leaders of her independence faction.

A court was convened at Emesa to try the Palmyrene rebels, and in a shameful act of cowardice Zenobia blamed her ministers for her actions. The ringleaders were executed and the remaining prisoners, together with Zenobia and Vabalathus, were placed on ships to be sent to Rome for Aurelian's triumph. While crossing the Propontis (Sea of Marmara), however, the vessel carrying the prisoners was shipwrecked in a storm, and only Zenobia and her son on their own ship survived to be paraded in Rome before the cheering crowds.

A swift conclusion of the Palmyrene business was called for because news of an invasion by the Carpi across the Danube had reached Aurelian. Leaving an *eques* called Marcellinus to govern Mesopotamia (in absentia, since the province was yet to be regained from the Sassanians, who had retaken it after Odenath's death), and a cavalry officer called Sandarianus as military governor of Palmyra, Aurelian set out for Moesia Inferior, which he reached in the fall of 272. A fierce campaign soon restored order and some of the invaders were settled in plague-depopulated areas of Moesia and Thracia. Palmyra, however, was not finished with Aurelian; he was about to go to Rome when he was handed a disturbing dispatch from Marcellinus. A certain Apsaeus had involved many leading Palmyrenes in a revolt and, despite its nationalistic character, had approached Marcellinus with a proposal of making him emperor. Loyal Marcellinus informed the conspirators that he would need some time to consider the proposal, and promptly sent a post-horse to the emperor with news of the alarming developments. Aurelian reacted with astonishing speed, and leaving Moesia crossed Anatolia by forced marches to reach Palmyra at the start of 273. However, the duration was long enough for Apsaeus to become distrustful of Marcellinus's intentions and proclaim another, Antiochus, king of Palmyra. He raised the standard of rebellion by attacking Sandarianus, who was killed together with his garrison of six hundred archers.

Luckily, the time had been insufficient for the Palmyrenes to reconstruct the city's fortifications, and it was taken without a fight. This time Aurelian did not hold back his troops and Palmyra was thoroughly sacked. Because of his insignificance Antiochus was spared, but the other rebel leaders were executed. Next, the army hastened south to Egypt, where a merchant called Firmus, probably a

member of Zenobia's party, had organized a rebellion in concert with Apsaeus. However, this had not spread widely through the province, and Aurelian's speed in reaching Palmyra deterred further malcontents from joining Firmus. Shut up with his confederates in a suburb of Alexandria, Firmus's stronghold was quickly invested, and he committed suicide rather than fall into the emperor's hands. Aurelian had the walls of Alexandria razed as a preventative to further rebellion.

Reunification and State Control

With peace secured along the Danube and—with the exception of Mesopotamia—the eastern provinces returned to Roman sovereignty, Aurelian was free at last to deal with the Imperium Gallorum. As has been recounted, Aurelian met Tetricus in the early spring of 274 near Cavillonum and was victorious. After settling the most urgent administrative matters in Gaul, he appointed Probus to the command of the Rhine troops and returned to Rome before the spring was out to celebrate his victories, justifiably satisfied with his work. In less than four years he had established peace along the frontiers and restored the eastern and western provinces lost under Gallienus; for his efforts the populace hailed Aurelian as *Restitutor Orbis* (restorer of the world). According to the ancient sources, Aurelian's triumph in Rome surpassed any previous celebration. Zenobia and Tetricus were present as captives in the procession, but mindful of arousing ire among the senatorial order at the sight of one of their members so humiliated, Aurelian restored Tetricus to his rank and estates, and awarded him with high office. Zenobia too was given her freedom and settled with a pension in a villa near Tibur (Tivoli). Of her son Vabalathus, would-be Augustus of the East, nothing more is heard.

An urgent reform of the monetary system became the first of Aurelian's priorities, without which internal stability could not be guaranteed. The rampant inflation caused by Gallienus's depreciation of the coinage had led to a collapse of faith in the currency. However, faced with a shortage of precious metals for minting, Aurelian's reforms were makeshift at best. Instead of recalling the mass of worthless billon introduced by Gallienus, he attempted to restore confidence in its face value through better workmanship and a slightly improved ratio of silver and gold to base metal. With a proper coating, the new money had the appearance of true silver or gold coins, although its intrinsic value was hardly improved. This solved only a part of the problem, but through other enforced reforms to the food supply and its pricing, the emperor lessened the gap between the value of the currency and the inflated cost of goods.

Aurelian's reforms were aided by the overthrow of Palmyra and the recovery of the eastern provinces, which resulted in a gradual increase of wealth from official confiscations and re-established revenues to the *fiscus*. As a result he was able to relieve the populace from the food shortages, which in turn helped to reduce the prices of goods. The middle class of less wealthy equestrians also benefited when he

canceled all arrears to the *fiscus*, and his popularity soared in consequence of his publicly burning the debt records in the Forum of Trajan. For the mass of citizens Aurelian's reign marked a return to the kind of state-controlled care that had obtained in the days of the Antonines and Severi. He regulated the cost of bread by fixing the price the *Collegium Pistorum* (millers' and bakers' guild) could sell a loaf, but in return increased the supply of corn coming from Egypt so that the bakers should not lose out. In addition, he replaced the badly managed and almost defunct system of the corn dole with a daily distribution of two pounds of bread free of charge to all registered citizens; a right that became hereditary.

In this respect Aurelian went further than any emperor before him by extending the dole to provisions such as pork, oil, and salt. However, these benefits came at the price of freedom among the *collegia* of butchers, oil processors, and bakers, whose previously voluntary associations were transformed into compulsory ones, and may even have been subject to military control. There is evidence for this in the new barracks constructed in the vicinity of the *Forum Suariorum* intended for the *Collegia Suariorum*, or pork wholesalers. That they were to work in a barracks and that their activities were strictly controlled by the urban prefect indicates the degree to which military discipline was applied to the food traders. There is no visible indication that similar barracks were built for the two other meat *collegia*: *Boarii* (beef dealers) and *Pecuarii* (mutton dealers), but it seems likely. Aurelian had done the same with the builder's craft guilds involved in constructing Rome's new defensive wall. In this, we see that Aurelian's reforms were designed to extend the supremacy of the state over the lives of all citizens, a hegemony that would be increased greatly by Diocletian and Constantine in the fourth century.

Religious and Military reforms

Aurelian's most visible innovation was the establishment of Sol Invictus at the head of the Roman pantheon of gods. He had a temple to Sol built and invested members of the senate to be its priests. As we have seen, the worship of Sol in this particular form had been established by Elagabalus and affronted stern Romans, but unlike Elagabalus Aurelian made no attempt to identify himself with the god he revered. Nor was the worship of Sol Invictus accompanied by any of the oriental excesses of Elagabalus. The institution of the religion has political significance. Throughout the third century the empire had been increasingly drawn toward a form of monotheism, which was often at odds with the political aspirations of its rulers. There was, therefore, a need to find a universal deity whose manifestation incorporated the huge variety of cults, while at the same time centralizing individual worship in the state religion. Aurelian felt that, having restored unity to the empire, all its citizens should join in common recognition of its majesty. In earlier times this had been achieved through the imperial cult, but the period of anarchy had debased the cult's prestige, and now Aurelian focused the emotional needs of the empire through the widely spread worship of the sun. During this period, and for some time thereafter, the traditional imperial headwear of oak leaves mutated into the "rays" of the characteristically spiked gold diadem of Sol Invictus, which a few previous emperors had worn; forerunner of the crowns of medieval kings of Europe.

The improved fortification of Italian cities was not echoed along the northern frontiers, probably because of the shortness of Aurelian's reign. On the Rhine, Probus reoccupied part of the *Limes Germanicus* abandoned to the Alamanni in 258 but not to lasting effect, and the Alamanni returned to the Agri Decumates in 275, after which the region was lost to the empire. Aurelian himself repelled a renewed invasion of the upper Danube in late 274, and made repairs to the *Limes Raeticus*, but further downriver he was forced to accept the vulnerability of Dacia to repeated Gothic invasions. Reluctantly, he decided to abandon the province and save the ruinous cost of garrisoning it. On the credit side, moving the Romanized population to the river's southern shore went a long way toward repopulating the provinces of Moesia, Pannonia, and Thracia that had been ravaged by barbarian invasions and the recurrent plague. Accordingly, Aurelian created a new province of Dacia and another called Dardania out of

parts of the two Moesias and Thracia, and established the Dacian legions, V Macedonica and XIII Gemina, at Ratiara (Arar) and Oescus, making Serdica (Sofia) the capital.

He raised two new legions, I Illyricum and IV Martia, drawn from among the population of Illyricum but stationed in Phoenicia and Arabia. The creation of these Illyrian legions underlines Aurelian's intention of stationing troops of European loyalty in the eastern provinces. However, establishing the frontier with Persia meant retaking Mesopotamia, and this was to be the program for 275. In preparation Probus was reassigned to Egypt, there to strengthen the frontier made uncertain by the revolt of Firmus.

Before setting out for Antioch the sixty-year-old emperor was obliged to suppress a revolt at Lugdunum (his ruthlessness was to leave a bitter taste for years) and repel a German invasion near Vindelicia, the region of Raetia in the vicinity of Augusta Vindelicorum (Augsburg). Then he gathered his Illyrian legions and headed for Byzantium—but never reached the city. While encamped at Caenophrurium, situated between Perinthus and Byzantium, the emperor's confidential secretary, Eros, fearing for his life after being caught out in a lie, circulated a forged document among several of the senior staff. It purported to be a list of officers Aurelian had condemned to execution for one reason or another. Eros had shrewdly used his knowledge of military politics to ensure that each man would have some misdemeanor on his conscience and had wisely added his own name to the list to convince them of his trustworthiness. Knowing Aurelian's notoriety as a disciplinarian, the group did not hesitate to march to his tent and murder him. Thus, in such utter silliness, died one of Rome's greatest emperors.

There was an interregnum of about a month, during which Aurelian's wife Ulpia Severina may have reigned, since some of her coins were issued after her husband's death. If this was so, it was with the senate's tacit approval in the hope that it would avoid public unrest. The emperor's murder created a unique situation, in which the Illyrian soldiers refrained from naming his successor. This was partly because they liked Aurelian and did not want to appear part of the officers' conspiracy by profiting from naming their own choice, and partly because of Marcus Aurelius Probus. As Aurelian's most devoted supporter, the Illyrians wanted to discover Probus's wishes in the matter of succession, And, in abstaining from any precipitate decision, they hoped to avoid giving the eastern troops the opportunity to proclaim their own emperor. As a result, a situation developed that had no precedent: the soldiers referred the decision to the senate. During the interregnum the senate accorded Aurelian divine honors in appeasement of his troops, and deliberated on his successor. In such a novel situation, their debate might have become protracted were it not for news of renewed unrest on the northern frontier that urged speed. Their choice was Tacitus, a consular and already seventy-five years old.

No reliable information exists on Tacitus prior to his consulship with the *Praefectus Vigilum* Julius Placidianus in 273, the man Claudius sent to relieve Augustodunum (Autun) from its siege by Victorinus. The attempt of the *Historiae Augustae* to link his ancestry to the Trajanic historian Gaius Cornelius Tacitus should be completely discarded. At the time of his elevation he was in Interamna (Terni), from where he made his way to Rome to accept the instruments of power. It would be simple to interpret his accession as a revival of senatorial authority over the soldiers, but nothing in Tacitus's six months on the throne indicates any such thing. Indeed, the reigns of Tacitus and his successor Florian were little more than an extension of the interregnum that followed Aurelian's death before the proclamation of Probus, his obvious successor. Were it not for the conspiracy that ended Aurelian's life and inter-army jealousy, neither would have become emperors.

Tacitus made his first business the seizure and execution of Aurelian's murderers, and his second the appointment of his half-

brother Marcus Annius Florianus (Florian) as his praetorian prefect. Despite his advanced years, Tacitus proved to be extraordinarily energetic. A horde of Heruli Goths—apparently recruited by Aurelian for the Persian campaign—had overrun Asia Minor after the expedition had been canceled by the emperor's murder. Cheated of their opportunity for plunder, the barbarians ravaged through Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, and as far south as Cilicia. Tacitus and Florian rounded up the barbarians and, by a mix of arms and persuasion, drove them back home. Tacitus had appointed another family member to be governor of Syria, but this Maximinus exercised such a harsh administration that a plot was formed to assassinate him. Having killed Maximinus, the angry conspirators, blaming Tacitus for their oppression, followed him as he made his way back to Europe and killed him as well.

Florian

Marcus Annius Florianus Pius Felix Invictus

[Augustus c.April to c.July 276]

Tacitus's death led to renewed civil war. Florian assumed the purple as a hereditary right without waiting for the soldiers' proclamation or the senate's recognition. However, within three weeks the eastern legions proclaimed Probus emperor. Believing he had the numerical advantage, Florian reversed his army's direction and marched south to engage Probus, but he had underestimated his opponent.

Probus had not risen to his position under Aurelian without demonstrating an astute military ability. Aware of his disadvantage in numbers, he employed Fabian tactics and avoided a pitched battle at Tarsus, where the two sides met. Using the rugged terrain, Probus's experienced Egyptian troops kept drawing out Florian's Europeans, who became demoralized and then, when disease broke out among them, mutinous. Unwilling to face a prolonged campaign in adverse conditions, Florian's men chose the easy option and murdered him.

Probus

Marcus Aurelius Probus

[Augustus c.May 276 to c.September 282]

Probus, a native of Illyricum, like the other two great warrior-emperors of the third century, was born in August 232 at Sirmium. In addition to his military prowess, Probus also demonstrated a flare for diplomacy when it better suited the outcome than fighting, a quality lacking in his immediate predecessors. During his reign he continued Aurelian's consolidation of the frontiers and the reconstruction of Gaul, which, as he had discovered during his tenure on the Rhine in 274, was still vulnerable to barbarian attack. He returned from Cilicia in order for the senate to ratify his imperial powers, and then immediately left Rome for Gaul, where separate bands of Longiones backed by Alamanni had crossed Germania Superior by way of the Nicer (Neckar) valley and Franks in the north had crossed the Rhine. Probus split his force and sent his *duces* to oppose the Franks while he tackled the Longiones. Both armies were victorious, and Probus captured the Longiones' chieftain, Semnon, together with his son. A treaty was agreed, and Probus set Semnon and his son free.

Another German tribe, the Burgundi, had come to the Franks' aid, and Probus moved north to confront them across the Rhine. The enemy was by far the stronger numerically, and Probus again

demonstrated his military shrewdness. He arranged for his troops to line the Roman bank and shout obscenities at the Germans. In short order the easily goaded barbarians took the bait and began to cross the river to reach their sneering tormentors, but their disorderly advance placed them in a perilous position. Roman archers began to pick off the advancing warriors wading waist-deep in the strong current and those that made it to the left bank were not allowed to organize themselves before the legions fell on them. Terms were offered to the defeated Burgundi, but when they refused to hand over all their prisoners of war, Probus attacked again and captured their leader, Igillus. The Burgundi prisoners were enlisted and distributed among the provincial garrisons, including one contingent that was sent to serve in Britannia. There, they were to demonstrate their loyalty to the emperor by refusing to support the province's governor when he attempted to rebel against Probus.

A concerted course of new fortifications was begun, as well as repairs to forts that had become dilapidated during the later period of the Imperium Gallorum. Many new forts were constructed on the eastern bank of the Rhine to command all the major river crossings and provide protection for Roman towns in Germania Inferior and Superior, and Gaul. One of Probus's peculiarities was a passionate belief in viticulture as a means of stabilizing the economy. He had many vineyards planted throughout the western provinces, including in Britannia, where the climate was more clement than it is today and where the grapes flourished reasonably, particularly in the south.

In 278 Probus was in Illyricum, repelling an invasion of Vandals, and restoring security in the provinces (as well as planting more vineyards). And in 279 he was in Lycia, which was being plagued by Isaurian brigands. These warriors took refuge in the mountain fortress of Cremne, from which they were eventually ousted through a betrayal by a disgruntled bandit who felt he had suffered unfairly at the hands of their leader, Lydius. The region had never been properly Romanized, so Probus established colonies of army veterans on their own land in return for the service of their sons when they reached the age of eighteen. In time these men would become the backbone of the Eastern Byzantine empire, albeit their history of brigandage would always present their masters with problems.

In Egypt a desert tribal confederation generally known as the Blemmyes broke through the southern border and advanced northward along the Nile in 280, capturing the cities of Ptolemais

Hermiou (El Manshah) and Coptos (Qift). This did not occupy Probus himself, and he was content to allow some of his *duces* to eject them, which was swiftly done, while he organized the large-scale reconstruction of the dykes, canals, and bridges along the Nile. It was the first time since the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian that this had been done properly, and the increase in productive land led to a dramatic improvement in Rome's grain supply. During the time he spent in Egypt, Probus had been planning a campaign against the Sassanians to recover Mesopotamia, but this was postponed when news of a revolt in Gaul and unrest on the frontiers demanded his attention in Europe. It is possible that a treaty was agreed with the new king, Vahram II, which suited the Sassanid ruler because he was still consolidating his reign after the death of Shapur I in 272. It also suited Probus, since he could leave the eastern provinces, reasonably sure that there would be no immediate Persian activity against Roman interests.

Grapes Were the Death of Him

On the way across the Balkans, he prevented the worst effects of a barbarian invasion of a Scythian tribe, the Bastarnae, from afflicting the Illyrian provinces by allowing their settlement on lands in Thracia. This was part of the continuing policy of the later third century of repopulating the devastated region after the plague epidemics, but it was also a factor in the degeneration of the empire. Taken in combination with their enrolment as levies in the army, whole swathes of the frontier regions were being barbarianized. Eventually, there would come a time when almost all the legions were comprised of men who had more sympathy with the tribes it was their duty to repel than with the Roman state they had sworn to serve.

The rebellion in Gaul centered on Lugdunum, whose inhabitants were still smarting from the harsh treatment meted out to them by Aurelian. A native of nearby Albingaunum, who had accumulated his wealth through banditry and was connected with the Franks, had raised the standard of revolt. How he intended to succeed is not known, unless he hoped for military aid from his Frankish allies, but faced with the sudden appearance of the emperor at the head of his legions, the fight went out of the rebels. At the same time Bonosus, one of Probus's *duces*, revolted. Commander of the Rhine fleet, Bonosus had somehow let a band of Germans capture and burn a squadron of ships. Fearful of Probus's retribution, he took shelter in having himself proclaimed emperor. Despite his carelessness with the fleet, Bonosus appears to have been a good soldier because the rebellion required considerable force in its suppression. The fighting was only stopped when Bonosus, despairing of his position, hanged himself. Probus spared the lives of his sons and wife. This affair may have had repercussions elsewhere in Hispania and Britannia. The slight evidence at Valentia (Valence) is the erasure of Probus's name from official inscriptions. The unnamed governor's revolt in Britannia—in which the recently arrived Burgundi refused to take part—was put down by Victorinus, who was consul with Probus in 282.

Indirectly, the emperor's devotion to growing grapes at every opportunity and the state of relative peace along the Danube contributed to his downfall. Mindful of the danger caused by under-employed soldiers, as part of his agrarian reforms Probus put the legions stationed at Sirmium to reclaiming the marshy land around the city. After celebrating a triumph in Rome, Probus set out for Illyricum in the summer of 282, intending to mobilize the army for a

renewed attempt to recover Mesopotamia. While he was at Sirmium news arrived that the army in Raetia had proclaimed Probus's praetorian prefect Carus, who was in command there, as emperor. Angered by the common laborers' work they had been subjected to in recovering the swamps for the planting of vineyards, the soldiers at Sirmium sided with their fellows in Raetia, rose up in mutiny and murdered Probus.

[Augustus c.September 282 to c.August 283]

As soon as Carus heard of Probus's murder, he sent a dispatch to the senate to announce his elevation by his troops. He nominated first his elder son, Marcus Aurelius Carinus, and soon after his younger son, Marcus Aurelius Numerianus (Numerian), as joint rulers with himself, and gave them each the rank of Caesar.

Carus was a break with the run of Illyrian emperors, since he appears to have been born in Narbo (Narbonne). He was probably in his early fifties at his accession in 282, which can only be inferred from the knowledge that he possessed two sons and an adolescent grandson. Disdaining any senatorial approval, Carus did not bother to visit Rome, but leaving Carinus as Caesar of the European provinces, made for Syria with Numerian to complete Probus's plans for the reconquest of Mesopotamia. To further strengthen his dynastic ties he arranged the marriage of Numerian to the daughter of Arrius Aper, his appointed praetorian prefect. (The preferred name is Arrius, but some historians call him Flavius Lucius or even Lucius Flavius. Since several prefects were named Aper, the confusion is understandable.)

In a short reign, Carus accomplished much. Marching through Pannonia, his army defeated forces of Quadi and Sarmatae that had broken into the province. The Romans encountered little resistance from Sassanian border guards on the Euphrates, and once again teeter-totter Mesopotamia was returned to Roman sovereignty. Carus now invaded Persia by way of Armenia and marched down the Tigris. King Vahram II—still distracted by domestic challenges to his authority—was unable to mount a concerted opposition. The Romans reached the capital, Ctesiphon, and Carus added the title Parthicus Maximus to his titles. He was pressing further south when he suddenly died in late July or early August 283. The circumstances of his death are mysterious. Illness is the most plausible explanation, but several reports suggested that lightning struck him down. Of course, he may have been the victim of an assassination, but the smooth succession of Numerian points to death by natural causes.

Numerian

Marcus Aurelius Numerianus

[*Co-Augustus c.August 283 to c.November 284*]

Carinus

Marcus Aurelius Carinus

[*Co-Augustus c.August 283 to July 285*]

Unlike his father, Numerian shuddered at a soldiers' life. The rigors of military campaigning held no attraction for him, and he much preferred studying literature and writing his own prose. It is not known whether he concluded any treaty with Vahram, although subsequent events point to the fact that he just left Persia without making any diplomatic contact at all. By March 284 he was in Emesa and apparently in good health; some Christian traditions also place him in Antioch at some point, where he is said to have ordered the martyrdom of the bishop (later St. Babylas). So the story goes, at some point after leaving Emesa, his vision became impaired and he took to riding in a litter to protect his eyes from the sunlight. This seclusion provided his father-in-law Arrius Aper with the opportunity to kill his weakling emperor. For some days the prefect kept the crime secret, until the imperial bodyguard noticed the odor of decay issuing from the litter. A more likely explanation is that Numerian expired from an illness and his staff officers colluded in concealing his death from the troops until a suitable successor could be found.

The discovery of the body led to an assembly in Nicomedia on November 20, 284, at which Valerius Diocles, *comes domesticorum* (commander of the cavalry arm of the imperial bodyguard), accused Aper of assassinating Numerian. Diocles personally executed the prefect for the crime and the troops proclaimed Diocles emperor. Once again, the soldiers had followed the precedent of making and unmaking emperors in quick succession, but in the elevation of Diocles they had made an emperor whose like Rome had not seen since Trajan.

The death of his father Carus in Persia left Carinus, as the elder of the two Augusti, responsible for maintaining a semblance of order among the soldiers. There is evidence that he continued his father's campaigns against the Quadi, before spending the winter of 283–84 in Rome, where he also commenced his second consulship, with Numerian as his colleague. A poetic source claims that Carinus visited Britannia in 284 to conduct a campaign of some sort, and assumed the

title Britannicus Maximus, also shared with Numerian. However, the date contradicts his inscription found at a villa situated between Sorviodunum (old Salisbury) and Vindocladia (Badbury), dated to 282–83. His title on the stone is *CÆS*. This suggests his presence in the province as Caesar under his father, and the timing of the events that followed makes the later (poetic) date extremely unlikely.

Soon after receiving news of Numerian's death, Carinus had to mobilize an army to deal with a usurper called Marcus Aurelius Julianus, who had risen in revolt in Illyricum (possibly on the borders of northern Italy). Carinus drew soldiers from the German legions and left the Rhine frontier dangerously under-protected, and then met Julianus near Verona. Carinus was the victor, and encouraged by success, proceeded into Illyricum to meet Diocles. The rival emperors met in Moesia in the valley of the Margus in July 285. According to historical tradition, the army of Carinus was on the point of victory when the emperor was treacherously slain by a trusted officer (but whose wife he had allegedly seduced).

The story of Carinus's murder is consistent with the negative literary tradition that referred to him as "the evil emperor Carinus." He is depicted as a bloodthirsty tyrant, executioner of senators, rapist of their wives, and murderer of those who had teased him when they were together in school. The *Historiae Augustae* records that he had nine wives and ignored his real wife, Magnia Urbica. It is doubtful that Carinus had either the time or the energy for such excessive sexuality, and if he was—as the more warlike of the brothers—brutal, he was surely no better nor worse than any run-of-the-mill third-century emperor. The literary damnation of Carinus was almost certainly orchestrated by his successor in what was, by now, a time-honored tradition of rewriting history; and the man who followed Carinus was certainly able to do that.

End of Volume One

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